The Desire to Live

Paul Acker

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The Desire to Live

Paul Acker

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A
Madame la Comtesse de Rocquigny
en respectueux hommage.
P. A.

I

MARCH was ending and the last light of day was fading. The streetcar that runs from Dijon Station up to Place d'Armes stopped at the crossroads of Rue de la Liberté, Rue des Godrans and Rue Bossuet, right in front of M. Coulandot's novelty shop,[1] *L'Épée de Bois.* It was raining a little and the footboard was slippery. The driver supported me by the arm, handed me my little black suitcase with its loose copper corners, then pointed to the store. The large front door was being closed. I stood there, staring at the still-lit shop windows. The rain clung to my collar in fine droplets. Two young men, carrying away the fabrics on display on the sidewalk, looked at me with laughter in their eyes.

It was the hour after work when labourers, shop employees, and soldiers fill the streets. Store lights reflected off the damp pavement; onlookers crowded the bookshop stalls; five or six kids shouted out the Paris newspapers while streetcars confused their shrill calls. A passer-by bumped into me without apologising.

I approached one of the young men:

"Monsieur Coulandot, please?"

"You want to see him?"

I nodded. He picked up a woman's mannequin dressed in a designer gown.

"Follow me," he said.

He turned and pushed open a low door. In the store, a skinny, bony old woman dressed in black was folding fabric coupons with practiced regularity, then replacing them on the shelves. A cashier, his nose in his book, was checking accounts. Seven chimes sounded on a wooden clock; suddenly, the electric bulbs in the shop windows went out and the iron curtain was drawn down.

"What does mademoiselle desire?" the old maid questioned in a dry voice.

"She wishes to see Monsieur Coulandot."

"Ah!" she said, inspecting me quickly. "You're the employee we've been waiting for. Claire Fournier, isn't it?"

"Y-yes, that's me," I stammered. "I've just come from the station.

The streetcar brought me here... the train was late."

I spoke blushingly, my eyes lowered, my suitcase still in my hand. The cashier paused his arithmetic, and the apprentices stared at me with sly faces.

"Inform Monsieur Coulandot," said the old maid to one of the apprentices. "You used to live in Gernin, near Beauconte, mademoiselle, if I'm not mistaken?" she added.

I wanted to respond.

"This is Monsieur Coulandot," she announced suddenly.

Large, robust, with a narrow forehead, thick cheeks, a Gallic-style moustache, short-cropped hair, a long jacket flapping down his legs, a beige shawl over his shoulders, wearing a small, soft felt hat, M. Coulandot appeared at the other end of the store. He walked heavily, scrunching his hands together.

"Ah! Mademoiselle Fournier!" he exclaimed.

A broad smile split his face and he shook my hand vigorously:

"How are you? How was your trip? I've got a bit of a cold, so I'm covering up. But let's not stay here."

Behind him, I climbed the stairs to the second floor. In a large room, another, less elderly lady was putting away clothes.

"This is my second store girl, Mademoiselle Berthe," he said. "The other one, the one who received you, is Mademoiselle Mélanie. They've both been here for years. My predecessor left me Mademoiselle Mélanie."

We had passed through a doorway and were standing on a stone landing, in a very old house, in front of a padded door.

"This is my home," said M. Coulandot as he entered.

It was a dining room; an oilcloth protected the table set for six. M. Coulandot increased the light of the hanging lamp. A few painted plates adorned the walls lined with red floral paper; to the left of the window, a piano displayed its tired keys; curved canes hung from gilded pegs near the fireplace where a wood fire blazed; in the glass-fronted sideboard, silver services had been lined up in order of size. M. Coulandot's satisfied eyes wandered over these familiar signs of prosperity. I stood before the table, silent, staring at nothing.

"Please get rid of that! You're making me feel sorry for you with that suitcase you won't let go of. Now, here, sit down."

I sat down. He weighed my suitcase and a pout stretched his lips.

“Devil!” he said. “It’s light. You have other luggage, I trust?”

“A trunk. The omnibus from the Bourgogne hotel is bringing it later.”

“And how are things at home?” he asked, sitting down beside me. “Is your father recovering a bit from his... emotions? He was unlucky... but his pride, too, betrayed him. Is it true that he now has a little job as a shop salesman?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And your mother, is she still unemployed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do they still get on so badly?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you, are you brave?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come, come, you mustn’t cry, Mademoiselle Claire! If... if... you feel like crying... Take off your hat and coat... it’s time for dinner... Hang this by my canes. And don’t be sad... I know it’s not fun to work. But you’ll see, when you work, you forget. And you won’t be unhappy here... My employees, you’ll see, are a bit like my children. They eat with me, they sleep in the house—they are family in the end. The apprentices live alone with their parents.”

M. Coulandot spoke, coughing, in a gruff voice, and as he accompanied his words with sweeping gestures, the shawl knitted by his wife slipped from his shoulders. He fiddled with his moustache, his bushy eyebrows knitted and almost fell over his bright little eyes; he looked at me, and we both smiled. M. Coulandot smiled, because underneath his tough exterior he was a kind man, trying to reassure a fearful soul; I smiled too, because for the first time since I left Gernin I felt a little calm.

“You’ll be on the first floor,” he said, “at the fabrics, with Mademoiselle Mélanie. She’s a very good girl. You’ll sleep in her room. That way you won’t suffer from any loneliness.”

He stood up; his shawl was still lying on the floor. I bent down, but he was already picking it up.

“No, no, Mademoiselle Claire, none of that, none of that.”

Then he pulled out his watch:

“Hey hey! ... half past already... But they’re late. Ah! they’re always late on Saturdays.”

The door opened: it was the employees.

“Here they are,” he said. “Well, let me introduce you:

Mademoiselle Claire Fournier, daughter of Father Fournier, the Gernin farmer. Mademoiselle Mélanie and Mademoiselle Berthe, my store girls. Monsieur Henry, my cashier. Where is Madame Coulandot?"

Mademoiselle Mélanie was about to inform him, when quietly, a small woman entered. She was in her forties; a few white threads silvered her chestnut hair; her blue eyes held a tender naïveté. She came right up to me and delicately kissed my forehead:

"My dear child," she said. "Welcome."

"Well, Jeanne," said M. Coulandot, "place Mademoiselle Claire next to you. It will make her happier."

The meal began. A large blonde maid placed each dish in the middle of the table, then disappeared. M. Coulandot served his wife first, then Mademoiselle Mélanie, Mademoiselle Berthe, me, the cashier, and himself. As soon as the plates were empty, he offered to fill them a second time: they refused; only then did he ring for the maid. M. Henry, on one side of the table, and Mademoiselle Berthe, on the other, were in charge of pouring the wine. I was barely eating: the soothing confidence I'd felt listening to M. Coulandot was fading away. Earlier, a last hope had fooled my anguish; I knew nothing of those among whom I was to live; M. Coulandot had spoken to me without hauteur as to an unhappy friend; I could only imagine what I did not know. Only now, under the pale light of the lamp, was the new life that would be mine revealed. These old maids, this cashier, my whole existence, the most insignificant minutes as well as the most serious hours, I would spend in their midst. How much they seemed to my youth already old, flameless, frozen, bound by their trade to the same attitudes, the same expressions! One day, I'd have that rigidity, that earthy look, that extinguished gaze. Mademoiselle Mélanie was a real terror for me: thin and grey, her face wrinkled, her cheekbones prominent, her cheeks hollow, her lips thinned, her nose pointed, her chin stubbly; she was silent; and, if questioned, she risked only an equivocal little laugh as an answer, so as not to compromise herself. She slowly brought her fork to her mouth, her eyes constantly directed towards Madame Coulandot, on whom she regulated her every movement, careful never to eat faster than the master's wife. Less elderly, Mademoiselle Berthe, dressed austerely in a straight black dress, was uglier, but with a comic ugliness that didn't ward off initial sympathy. In the middle of the rounder,

puffier, yellower figure, under long hair that stuck together, ironic Nature had fashioned an almost mutinous nose, a nose in the air, a giddy nose, and set two very soft brown eyes; a mysterious smile wandered over her soft mouth; her neck was grey and reddish. Her tone was honeyed, her gestures mannered, the little finger of her left hand always raised above the others, for coquetry's sake. M. Henry, his shoulders narrowed, his beard trimmed in a fan shape, gobbled up his meat and vegetables, without depriving himself of conversation, but with surprising speed, like a busy man who regrets it but can't help himself. From time to time, Madame Coulandot, her hands clasped on her napkin, would glance vigilantly across the table. M. Coulandot's loud voice rang out. He was getting irritated, his face scarlet, his whiskers wet with sauce, the knife brandished strongly in his fist. The following Sunday, Dijon would elect a deputy; M. Coulandot supported the radical candidate, who demanded the separation of Church and State; M. Henry, whose exemption from military service inclined him towards nationalism, defended the clerical candidate. Mademoiselle Mélanie's stifled little laugh would venture out, only to expire immediately; and occasionally Mademoiselle Berthe would hazard a word. An endless weariness invaded me. My thoughts returned to the Gernin farm, where I'd led a sorrowful existence between my father, harsh and despotic, his head feverish with countless costly farming projects, greedy for money and proud of the education he'd given himself, and my mother, simple, withdrawn, and weak. What violent scenes between this husband and wife who did not love each other, did not understand each other; he, stubbornly striving to improve a nigh sterile land, enthusiastic about new methods, scientific machines, chemical fertilisers, borrowing from the farm to apply the theories he'd learned in books; she, disapproving through her silence, foreseeing failure, predicting ruin! I saw again this land without horizon, narrow and poor, fifteen kilometres from the nearest station, these woods planted with stunted trees, wild plants and brambles, these meadows with short grass and full of stones, these strips of red earth, crumbly and ungrateful, ploughed with difficulty and with meager profit. The village stretched for three hundred metres along the road that runs from Dijon to Vitry-le-François, its thirteen or fourteen houses lined up on one side of the road, facing a deep forest whose boundary ended a few paces away. The village was almost always deserted, for the peasants,

lumberjacks imprisoned in the woods all week in winter and only able to leave on Sundays, hired themselves out in summer to work the harvest on the neighbouring tenant farms of Beauconte, Vernay and Étion. The only people to be seen there were the parish priest and his father, both gardener and sacristan, the small grocer, the tobacco merchant, and the occasional stray traveller. What I wouldn't have agreed to now to live there again! The dread of the future dispelled the sad memories of the past.

"Poor thing," said Madame Coulandot, "she's dying of sleep. It's nine o'clock. She needs to go to bed. Would you show her to her room, Mademoiselle Mélanie?"

Mademoiselle Mélanie immediately shook off the breadcrumbs from her skirt, smoothed the ruffles on her blouse, carefully rolled up her napkin, slipped it neatly into a metal ring, and smiled at me. M. Coulandot smoked a cigarette, M. Henry drank a glass of liqueur. This smile, too insincere, paralysed me. However, I took my suitcase and followed Mademoiselle Mélanie.

She climbed the stairs, lifting her dress with her fingertips, and, as the steps were high, revealed her elasticated ankle boots and the first stitches of her white stockings. At the top floor, she drew a key from a pocket hidden in her petticoat and pushed open a door. We were in an attic room, lit by an electric bulb, with a half-window in the roof. Mademoiselle Mélanie entered first. At the far end of the room, a copper bed stretched over the calorifier's mouth.

"That's my bed," she said.

There was another bed, lower, narrower, between the door and the window.

"That's yours," she said with authority.

A chair rested at the foot of each bed; to the right of the door, an old desk served as a dressing table; a secretary, with a straw armchair, occupied half the wall:

"It's my secretary," said Mademoiselle Mélanie, "but you can write at it."

In one corner, a trunk was almost lost amongst the pattern of an ornate rug.

"We'll put your trunk in the other corner," she continued.

I thanked Mademoiselle Mélanie. She lit a night-light and placed it on a small wicker table, like the ones the Bohemians sell. I began to undress, and Mademoiselle Mélanie went to the door.

"Are you leaving, mademoiselle?" I asked.

“Yes, for a moment. I check the store every evening to make sure everything’s locked up and all the lights are off. I’m the eldest employee, therefore I’m the one with this responsibility. Here, in our rooms, from eleven o’clock onwards, there must be no more lights.”

And lowering her voice, she added, already frightened:

“Fire could break out.”

The rain was coming down harder; the call of the streetcars continued into the night. I went to bed. Mademoiselle Mélanie returned; she sat down at the writing desk, wrote for a while, then poured a little oil into the pilot light and turned the key twice in the lock. Finally, she undressed, methodically arranged her belongings on the chair, sank into bed and lay on her back, smoothing the folds of the sheets with her hand for a while before calming to rigor stillness.

I couldn’t sleep. The rain bounced off the slate roof; the glow of the night-light, a small plaster church with blue, pink and green stained-glass windows and openwork architecture, projected strange patterns on the ceiling. Mademoiselle Mélanie was breathing heavily. Eleven o’clock sounded in the distance. A thousand memories, a thousand images floated through my mind. The speed of time frightened me. So, now I was living in a strange house, in the company of an unknown spinster, in this wretched room. A few hours earlier, I was still in Gernin. The carriage was waiting on the road to take me to Tilloy Station. My father had embraced me for a long time; that weathered, withered face, with the sharp eyes under the thick eyebrows, the whiskers yellowed by tobacco, the scarred cheek, loomed before me, as if carved from oak. How much I loved him as a child! I admired what he said, what he did, his imperious, violent nature; like him, I was proud, tyrannical, crazy about freedom... I didn’t love my mother, or at least I thought I didn’t; and although my father never gave in to tender feelings, it was my mother I blamed for not giving me any caresses or treats. My mother suffered without complaint. I’d finished my years of boarding at the Visitation Sisters[2] in Dijon, and by the time I got back to the farm I’d guessed everything: failed projects, mortgaged property, multiplied debts. My father was embittered, quick to insult and threaten, and threw terrible tantrums. The farm had to be sold. I decided to earn a living. But how could I do that? My father had never allowed me to prepare for exams; I was to be a young

lady, not a schoolteacher. For weeks, we searched in vain. Dismayed, I unravelled all the inability, selfishness and ignorance hidden behind this foolish pride; my most cherished illusions were crumbling. One morning, at breakfast, after a visit from a businessman, he hit his wife. I rushed over; she had pushed him away; he recoiled stupidly. She indifferently let me console her distress. Poor woman! While she spurred on the horse, I watched her. Her body shaken by the bumps of the carriage, a shawl knotted on her chest, the reins in her thin hands, she bore the deep marks on her face of fruitless fatigue and desperate resignation to misfortune; she didn't speak, she seemed to think of nothing. The mist veiled the horizon; the woods were tinged red as in autumn; and everything was red, the trees, the earth, and the water...

Mademoiselle Mélanie was asleep, a hoarse breath escaping from her half-open mouth. An uncertain hour, disturbing the silence, made it heavier. I shivered; the cold night air crept in through the poorly fitted window. I wanted to get up and close it, but the fear of waking Mademoiselle Mélanie held me fast. When I could bear the chill no longer, I sat up, moved my clothes from the bedside chair to the bed, and covered my shoulders with my comforter. I was still shivering, and sleep eluded me. I'd never experienced a night like it. In winter, in Gernin, when the snow magically lifted the ground and the wild boars, hunted by hunger, came down to the first houses, how often I leaned against the window! The moon, amidst the stars, shed a blue light on the whiteness of the forest and fields; the wind moaned along the walls, and I listened, enraptured, to its laments or its fury. Here, all I could hear was Mademoiselle Mélanie's laboured breathing; all I could see was the glow of the night-light; spring would follow winter, and summer spring... and nothing would change. Summer! I repeated the word mechanically. An image emerged from the shadows: a pure oval face, large caressing eyes under long lashes, a fine mouth, black hair rolled into thick curls, a straight nose, dazzling teeth. I recognised her well, the fifteen-year-old girl who spent every vacation at Vernay, on her parents' estate. One summer afternoon, she'd arrived at the farm with a group of other young girls; she exuded a charm that no one could resist. At that moment, Madeleine Alquier had personified for me all beauty, all grace, all gentleness; she came back often, illuminating the house with her presence. My father would come running; my mother would

become cheerful. I'd probably never see her again. What was I now?...

II

MADEMOISELLE Mélanie sat in her petticoat at the foot of the bed, putting on her shoes. It was no longer raining, the blue sky was cool and damp; but in the light of day, in the disarray of waking, the room, where the smell of the night lingered, appeared more miserable.

"Aren't you getting up yet?" asked Mademoiselle Mélanie.

I suddenly felt an insurmountable discomfort at the prospect of leaving my bed and getting dressed in front of her.

"I slept so poorly," I replied to save a couple of minutes.

Mademoiselle Mélanie paused and looked at me with pitiful disdain.

"It's Sunday," she said, "and the store's closed, so you can still sleep without worry."

She added:

"You hear Mass, don't you?"

"Of course."

"High Mass is celebrated at nine o'clock, and it's eight o'clock now."

She started combing her hair in front of the old desk. Her yolk-yellow arms stretching out of a large canvas shirt, she first parted the hair at her forehead into two bands, pulled these down against her cheeks, clamped the ends between her teeth, and combed the remaining hair back; then she rolled it into a bun. The comb uncovered the bare spots of her scalp. Once her hair was done, she fastened her earrings and put on a corset; only then did she wash, but with modesty, hiding her knobby throat with the towel, and soaping only her cheeks, nape, and hands. She removed a black cashmere dress hanging on the wall, a taffeta mantelet, and a bonnet with straps.

"You're wonderfully lazy!" she snapped at me.

I kept quiet.

"We're having lunch at noon sharp," she said more loudly. And no doubt irritated by my silence, she turned away with a quick movement and left.

Mademoiselle Mélanie's patent leather boots, her Sunday boots, creaked on the staircase steps, then the noise diminished, faded away. I stood up, suddenly happy because the disappearance of the old woman had given me a fleeting sense of freedom. I paid no attention to the narrow, poorly emptied basin, the wet desk, the unmade bed with its discarded blanket and crushed pillow, or the faded paper on the wall: I was alone; there was no one to watch over me. What small pleasures would now form my great joys! The confused clamor of the city was rising in the air, and the sun's chilly rays were playing on the gleaming roofs. A mirror reflected my image back to me: a pale face under brown hair swept back and falling over my shoulders, with grey eyes elongated under my lashes; fatigue encircled my eyes, the corners of my mouth tilted. I looked for the pitcher and filled the bowl, amused by its smallness. The cold water was delicious; for a long time, I bathed my face, arms, and body in it, unaware that it was flooding the floor. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

"Can we come in?" asked a booming voice.
"Don't come in, don't come in!" I shouted.
"It's the trunk," resumed the voice. "I'll leave it on the landing."

Heavy footsteps drifted away. Quickly, I finished bathing, pulled the trunk inside and pushed it into the corner indicated by Mademoiselle Mélanie. Kneeling, I lingered to lift the dresses and linen. My time at the Visitation convent, frequented by children of the bourgeoisie, had made me a little coquettish. They were light-coloured dresses, fine linen that I'd embroidered, the last vestiges of an affluence that all Gernin had once envied. With a weary gesture, I abandoned them. What would I do with them now? They only reminded me of a bygone era when, sad as I was, I dreamed of a happy life! Who would reveal happiness to me? It didn't matter. I didn't even ask myself that question, but I knew it would come, and love with it. Happiness, love, vague words I no longer understood! At the very bottom of the trunk, I found a black, pleat-less dress, the first uniform dress paid for by M. Coulandot for his store girls.

Once dressed, I went to Saint-Bénigne to hear High Mass in the cathedral, which dates all the way back to the 13th century. The only time I'd ever heard Mass was in the little chapel of the

Visitation Sisters and in the Gernin church. The deep music of the organ, the sound of the voices, the fragrance of the incense, the light shining through the stained-glass windows, the ray of sunlight dancing with shining dust, all delighted me. I didn't read the service of the parish priest; instead, I listened to the chants, I breathed in the perfumes; a kind of languor, while numbing my soul, enchanted it with a thousand imaginations. Even in the murmur of the priest bent at the foot of the altar, and in his habitual gestures, I discovered a mysterious grandeur. A few moments after the Gospel, as I sat down again, I saw Mademoiselle Mélanie on my right, three or four rows behind me. She was holding a thick book; her lips were moving restlessly, while her head was bent forward, her chin touching her chest. When Mass was over, I thought I'd return with her to the store, but she'd raced on ahead. Only in M. Coulandot's house did I meet her halfway up the stairs, already bareheaded and coatless:

"What have you been doing in my bedroom?" she asked, the floor flooded.

"I-it's from washing," I stammered.

"This room is my room," she declared, "and I demand that it always be clean."

She deliberately walked past me and made her way back downstairs; after mopping the floor, I soon joined her in the dining room. As Sunday lunch in Burgundy is usually, in old families, a small party and almost an occasion for harmless debauchery, Madame Coulandot had arranged the table luxuriously. Amid a white tablecloth with broad red stripes, a green plant sprang from a copper planter, and two glasses stood in front of each plate. Everyone was dressed in his or her best clothes; M. Coulandot himself, although Sunday was a day like any other for him, observed that provincial habit which spares oneself the concerns of excessive grooming.

"Well, Mademoiselle Claire!" he cried. "Did you sleep well?

I didn't dare tell him the truth, and simply replied:

"Yes, sir."

"Bravo!" he continued. "At your age, one should always sleep well. Besides, you've no doubt appreciated the modern comforts of these rooms, the electricity, the water on the landing... Ah, I'm all for progress. Only it wasn't easy to arrange all that in this old house."

He would hardly have forgiven me if I hadn't slept well in these rooms, which he considered so comfortable; he passionately wanted everything to be appreciated.

"You're not eating, Mademoiselle Claire," he remarked. "If I refused a dish... and there were many... You must eat. You don't drink, either," he continued. "If a glass is full, it should be drunk. How are you going to work all week if you feed only off the air of the times? That's well and good for lovers!"

Mademoiselle Mélanie's equivocal little laugh escaped, and Mademoiselle Berthe blushed.

Towards the end of the meal, M. Coulandot stopped attending to me with those gruff manners which chilled me and which I naïvely attributed to his contempt for religion; for piety alone seemed to me capable of softening the movements of the soul and the gestures of the body. I was also dismayed by this kind of moral servitude, to which his store girls were naturally so docile towards him. I imagined that he was imposing it on them, without suspecting that, because of their humble nature, they were complying of their own accord. I still remember a few examples of this submission.

"This morning," recounted Coulandot, "I chatted with Madame de Rédoran, the old Madame de Rédoran, on the way back from the station, in front of Saint-Bénigne. She was coming out of church where her carriage was waiting. She beckoned, I approached, and there she was, congratulating me on finally getting to Mass. I protested and she waved her arms: 'Ah!' she cried. 'What a bad and dangerous example you're setting! You're an honest man, good, charitable, just, generous, but you have no religion. What a weapon you provide to those who want to establish a morality without God! But you should fear the future. You own the best store in town, that's true. But let another shopkeeper set up tomorrow, as intelligent as you, but pious, going to church on Sundays, taking communion at Easter: all good society will leave you.'"

"And what did you say?" asked Madame Coulandot.

"But that I sold my sheet just as well to devotees as to atheists, and that if I reasoned as she did, I should never sell her an inch of it. So, she laughed, and we parted as best we could."

His gaze fell on Mademoiselle Mélanie.

"Ah!" he said, "Mademoiselle Mélanie doesn't approve of me and deems me worthy of hell."

"Oh, I don't think anything of the sort!" exclaimed Mademoiselle

Mélanie, all pink with emotion. “I wouldn’t allow myself to think that. I go to church, but I can well understand why others don’t.”

M. Coulandot spoke of his son Louis. That very morning, he had received a letter from Louis, a student at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, announcing his imminent arrival for Easter. At the age of twenty-five, Louis Coulandot had only his final project to present in order to obtain his architect’s diploma. Doubtless, Mademoiselle Mélanie wanted to correct a bad impression she thought had remained with M. Coulandot; suddenly, she poured out ardent praise for the young man.

“We’ve never seen such a young architect,” she said. “It’s something to be proud of. If Monsieur Louis settles in Dijon, he’ll earn whatever he wants. Besides, it’s not surprising that Monsieur Louis should succeed. He was already so intelligent in high school and worked so hard!”

“You exaggerate, Mademoiselle Mélanie,” interrupted M. Coulandot. “You exaggerate furiously. Louis was the most undisciplined of schoolboys, the most moody, the most whimsical. He worked when he felt like it, and until he was eighteen, he worried me. Only in Paris did he become serious. And then, Mademoiselle Mélanie, there are many young people who are architects by the age of twenty-five.”

The poor woman stammered a few words, her face red with confusion. A huge Saint-Honoré, brought by the maid with outstretched arms, happily dispelled the embarrassment for all of us. M. Coulandot poured some fine wine, then engaged in a discussion with M. Henry, the cashier. Soon, coffee was steaming in the cups. At half-past two, Madame Coulandot rose from her chair: this was the signal for departure; Mademoiselle Mélanie, who spent every Sunday afternoon in Talant, a small village three kilometres from Dijon, where her sister was married, followed her at once; then Mademoiselle Berthe; then Monsieur Henry; and I remained alone with Monsieur Coulandot, still seated at the table the maid was serving.

“And you, Mademoiselle Claire,” he said, “what will you do? Do you know anyone in Dijon?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Father Guérand.”

“The abbot Guérand! He’s a good man. And how do you know him?”

“He used to own a small house in Beauconte and often came to

visit us in Gernin. It was he who put me in boarding school with the Visitation Sisters."

"Hmm... Is there anyone else?"

"There are also the Aubins."

M. Coulandot was hearing the name for the first time.

"They are my mother's cousins, artists," I said with a little pride. "Monsieur Aubin is a medal engraver."

"Ah!" he said.

I could tell he didn't like artists. He walked a few steps, lit a cigar:

"Well, you'll have to go to Father Guérand's if you want to get out. I don't like priests, but I know what this one's worth. He's a good man, and a rare good man. We rarely have much conversation, but we always greet each other. I respect him. If they were all like him, we could agree. Did your parents tell him you were here?"

"Oh, no! We haven't seen him since the summer. Dad wouldn't write that the farm was sold."

"Still out of pride?"

I lowered my head.

"You have your mother's face," he said, "but your father's character. He gave you a lot of himself, I think... Now, now, let's not talk about it. Put on your hat. Vespers ends at Notre-Dame at three o'clock, and it's quarter past already."

Father Guérand lived near his parish church, Notre-Dame, in a quiet district populated by antique dealers and second-hand booksellers. It was entered through a low wooden door with a bronze knocker. It comprised four rooms: on the first floor, the dining room with a salon; upstairs, the bedroom and a study. The salon extended into Place des Ducs via a turret, where a man and a woman, naked to the waist and holding a cornucopia in their hands, were sculpted under the window ledge. Several priests, concerned about priestly modesty, reproached him for choosing to shelter his meditations in a dwelling embellished with such scantily clad attributes. He let them have their say, not conceiving that such naïve boldness could procure anything other than delicate pleasure. He owed to his father, a former director of the school of painting, along with a very advanced education, a taste for the beautiful things that charm existence; and although he was drawn to the grave mysteries of religion at an early age, he believed that the

strictest practice of a holy mission could be combined with a lively predilection for all the pursuits of art. He was considered too free-spirited. He found in his ministry nothing but the marvelous opportunity for continual devotion: inclined towards all miseries, he did not ask, before obliging an unfortunate person, to which denomination he belonged: first he relieved, then he spoke of God; finally, he dreaded absolute judgments, convinced that one can never penetrate a soul deeply enough to condemn it without recourse. He defended, he explained, he forgave; for himself, however, he admitted no excuse. He sometimes said he preferred a sincere atheist to a false devotee. Such principles made his career neither easy nor brilliant. For many years, he ministered in country churches, then took up cures lost in the woods. Tall, lean, with his cassock fitted to his body, solid, with no finesse, bones and muscles, the air of the fields and forests, the harshness of winter and the summer sun had hardened and dried his skin. He had the gnarled face of a peasant: but this face, the most intelligent smile illuminated it, the most tender too. Premature snow speckled his still abundant hair; but his persistent eyes, where the most sudden acuteness mingled with the most comforting gentleness, revealed all the youth of his soul. The bishopric criticised him not only for his independent character, but also for his lack of elegance: a big-city priest must have the manners of a man of the world, and so he owed his canon's seat at Notre-Dame to the fleeting passage of a less narrow-minded prelate, an appointment which was quick to arouse the anger of the clergy, and which the next bishop accepted only with the resolution to refuse him any further mark of esteem. Without ambition, he could imagine no greater happiness than to end his days in Dijon.

Father Guérand, seated in front of the fireplace in his study, where a log fire was blazing, his buckled shoes replaced by warm slippers, was beginning to read the Paris newspapers, when his housekeeper announced that a young girl, Mademoiselle Claire Fournier, wished to speak to him. He loved this room, even though the disjointed rhombuses of the parquet groaned under his footsteps. He had gathered together old pieces of furniture inherited from his father, small reading tables, armchairs, and chests of drawers with iron fittings. The walls disappeared behind the army of books; only the back wall, lined in grey, with a heavy oak table in front of it, loaded with leaflets, brochures, and magazines,

remained visible, adorned simply with a large ivory crucifix, with a reproduction of the *Last Supper*, da Vinci, and of the *Pilgrims to Emmaus*. No pious trinket—the bleeding heart of Jesus, or statuette of the Virgin, or divine Lamb lying in a paperweight—detracted from the calm gravity of this retreat. Leaning forward a little, Father Guérand could see, from the chimney, through the turret window, the garden of the square populated by fir trees, with its fountain running over artificial rocks.

"So, you're out for a walk in Dijon, my child?" he said, taking my hands.

"Ah! Yes, that's right, you don't know."

He towered over me, and I bowed my head. He stared at me, astonished by the black dress I was wearing.

"What don't I know?" he asked.

"The farm is sold... we are ruined... we have nothing left... though, I am employed..."

Gently he led me to his armchair, sat down opposite me, hands dangling between his spread knees.

"I knew your business was in trouble," he said, "but I didn't know it'd come to this... Why didn't your father write me? Pride again... Where are you employed?"

"At Monsieur Coulandot's."

"Ah, so much the better," he said. "He's an honest man. Have you been here for very long?"

"I arrived last night."

"And you're coming to see me today? That's good. And you're not overwhelmed?"

"It was a lot last night. First in the store, and then at night, in the room where I slept, a garret, a servant's room. I wasn't even alone in that room. There was an old maid, the oldest store girl. It was cold. I didn't sleep. I thought of my childhood, of Gernin, of the farm... In Gernin, I wasn't very happy, but I didn't depend on anyone."

Leaning back now against the fireplace, Father Guérand listened to me in silence; with a familiar gesture, he stroked his chin with his left hand.

"And today?" he asked.

"Today, strangely enough, the night has almost delivered me from my sadness... I feel proud, because I'm going to earn my living."

He nodded:

"You have all your father's pride."

"Me!"

"Last night you were suffering in your pride at having to work. Today you're rejoicing in your pride at earning your own living. It's always pride... I remember a very small scene from your school days. You never played with your classmates at the Visitation Sisters as you felt it was beneath you, so you told them endless stories at recess. Then you agreed to buy a doll, your first doll, when you were fourteen... and immediately the children stopped admiring you: you had a doll just like them. How you cried because your superiority was crumbling!"

"That's right," I said, amused by the memory.

"I also remember something else. I was walking with you one Sunday in Gernin, two years ago. The woodcutters we met all greeted us, but you sometimes didn't respond to their greeting. I asked you why: 'I don't greet people who don't go to Mass,' you said. That's not good piety, my child. You can skip Mass and still live as an honest man. Monsieur Coulandot doesn't practice, and yet, as far as I know, he's loyal and good. You must be indulgent, my child, and tolerant too. These are true Christian virtues."

I couldn't hide my surprise at these words. Undoubtedly, M. Coulandot enjoyed a great reputation for honesty throughout the town, but it was repugnant to me that a priest could propose him as an example.

He guessed what I was thinking.

"Yes," he said, "some people lament that this excellent man doesn't practice, and would prefer him to practice hypocritically, without believing. Ah, I've known him a long time. We're about the same age. He's from Saint-Seine-l'Abbaye. His father had made a few cents selling vanilla sticks, the local specialty. He went to school until he was fifteen or sixteen, then to work for the Martin brothers, who had founded *L'Épée de Bois,* a very small store in those days. There he worked hard, and in his spare time he learned. He read... he read... and he was interested in politics: he joined groups, committees. He was a radical, a radical in the nuances of Léon Bourgeois. I'm telling you this as if you knew! When Father Coulandot died, his son was thirty years old. The Martin brothers wanted to retire. He bought the house and developed it, enlarged it, modernised it; and yet he kept the rule dear to his former bosses of

living as a family with his employees. This devil of a man, despite his opinions, has all the city's fine clientele, and yet this fine clientele is steeped in devotion. He makes no secret of the fact that he has sympathy for me, and I have esteem for him. And you, do you like your boss?"

Father Guérand walked back and forth across the room, his hands behind his back, his biretta over his ear, with long, slow strides and a slight sway, sometimes stopping with his body slightly overturned. I was so taken aback by his question that I only replied:

"Why, yes. Of course."

He laughed:

"That's a very timid yes."

"He scares me," I replied. "And yet he's been charming many times. But his voice, his face, his gestures, they're all so... imperious..."

"What about the other employees?"

"There are apprentices, a cashier who hasn't said a word to me, and two old maids."

"Two old maids," he repeated, "two old maids! Did you sleep in one of their rooms?"

"Yes, in Mademoiselle Mélanie's room."

A flash of anger shone in my eyes:

"Oh, I hate her! She's ugly. She's mean."

Immediately, I felt ashamed of this irritated confession, and I wanted to make up for its unpleasant frankness.

Father Guérand simply laid his hand on my shoulder:

"Be good to her, my child, love her. Your youth still prevents you from grasping all the regret that lies in the hearts of old maids. They don't live, they die without having lived, and there's nothing more beautiful than life."

As the hour wore on, I said goodbye, and I didn't dare look at him, so afraid was I that there would be on his face the silent reproach of the words that had escaped me. But he didn't remember, or pretended not to. He led me back to the street door, and there, shaking my hand, he said:

"Come sometimes to my house on Sundays, Mademoiselle Claire. I'm always there, as soon as Vespers is over, and I rarely go out. Give my regards to your father when you write to him."

I made my way back to the store, lingering in the streets. The bookshop stalls attracted me most of all. I contemplated all those

books, which I imagined to be full of wonders. The very names of the authors were foreign to me, and that made them seem all the more illustrious.

As I reached M. Coulandot's house, someone called my name. It was M. Coulandot himself walking behind me.

"Your cousin, Madame Aubin," he said, "arrived immediately after you left. She's a strong woman, very dark, with thick features and a very uncomfortable look. Your mother had written to her. She asked me to let you dine with her this evening. I replied that my employees did as they pleased on Sundays after having lunch with me. So, if you're not home by seven, she won't be expecting you."

I was weary. I didn't know the Aubins and I still didn't feel much like getting to know them.

"It's perfect," said M. Coulandot. "On Sunday evenings, I always play a little music. My wife plays the piano, I play the violin, Monsieur Henry plays the flute. We're not artists, but you won't be bored."

III

MADAME Coulandot's bedroom, overlooking Rue des Godrans, served as a salon: lit by two large windows and located on the second floor, it was the most beautiful room in the whole house. A mahogany bed, draped on either side by a thick crimson curtain and covered by a Turkey red comforter, hid the back wall; it stood opposite a piano, balanced on glass pedestals, occupying the entire space between the two windows. The marble of the mantelpiece disappeared beneath the knick-knacks, porcelain statuettes, small vases, small baskets made of silver wire, fake chinoiseries, such as one sees in fairground lotteries. Photographs of relatives and friends were hung and placed everywhere, as if at random, but nevertheless, if one paid attention, with a very keen concern for regularity and correspondence. One of them was wider and higher than the others and had a place of honor above the piano. It was a photograph of M. Coulandot: dressed in his frock coat and gloved, a silk hat in his hand, a white tie around his neck, the chain of his watch across his paunch, he was smiling in the middle of a gilded frame. The chairs and armchairs were tapestry. There were no rugs on the floor, but in front of each seat were arranged squares of multicoloured sheets. An electric chandelier hung from the ceiling, shedding a bright light.

When dinner was over, M. Coulandot rose first.

"Why don't we go into the living room," he said.

Mademoiselle Mélanie wasn't due back until about ten, but Mademoiselle Berthe and Monsieur Henry were there. No sooner had M. Coulandot said these words than we left the table and hurried into the living room. Mademoiselle Berthe sat by the fireplace; I sat next to her. Madame Coulandot had opened the piano and folded the embroidered cloth that covered the keys; M. Coulandot was taking the violin out of its box and M. Henry was adjusting the pieces on his flute.

"Do you like music, Mademoiselle Claire?" asked Monsieur Coulandot.

I replied that I loved it, and that I'd only ever heard church

music and the music of village festivals. He smiled slightly pitifully.

"You're going to hear more," he said.

A discussion ensued between M. Coulandot and M. Henry. What would be played? M. Henry, who was second flute at the Dijon Philharmonic Society, had a weakness for the latest music. I'd be forgiven for thinking that he didn't understand much about it, but he must have felt that this preference put him, at least in this artistic field, far above his boss. M. Coulandot hated it, claiming that it was the opposite of music, since it suppressed melody, and that there was no true music without melody. However, he sometimes agreed to decipher them. Just last week, at M. Henry's insistent request, a trio from *Lohengrin* had been played. M. Henry wanted it to be played again; M. Coulandot adamantly refused; Madame Coulandot, who was conciliatory to the core, proposed that one hour be devoted to music dear to her husband, and the next to music dear to the cashier. M. Coulandot didn't accept this compromise either, and it was naturally he who prevailed: it was decided that a Chopin trio would be played, followed by a Beethoven trio. These were almost unknown names to me.

Madame Coulandot, seated on a stool artfully heightened by a large dictionary, prefaced her work with a few notes; M. Coulandot, behind her and in front of a music stand, strummed his violin, tightened one peg, loosened another; M. Henry, sitting on a small chair, his eyes fixed on the easel bearing the leaflet, drew four or five sounds from his flute. When the instruments were in tune, M. Coulandot raised his bow, lowered it, raised it again, counted one, two, three, struck the floor with his foot, and the piece began. Chopin's music was painful and tormented; at first, it astonished me and, if I may say so, baffled me with its dissonances, then it moved me deeply. The musicians did not play with perfect ensemble; M. Henry, either secretly irritated that Wagner had not been chosen, or simply a mediocre performer, did not follow with impeccable accuracy the measure that M. Coulandot insisted on marking so strongly with his foot. But the wonderful thing about beautiful music is that, even if it's not admirably interpreted, it touches the soul, confuses it, and inclines it to dream. I had closed my eyes, an infinite sadness filled my heart, and yet I was almost happy. Mademoiselle Berthe also closed her eyes but was dozing. As the trio finished, she woke up in the most natural way and poured out her compliments. M. Coulandot leaned towards his wife:

“It was very good, very good.”

And he kissed the top of her head.

She said, a little scandalised:

“Oh! Armand!”

She blushed, and he laughed.

“Well,” he said, turning to the cashier, “what do you think of this? It’s something other than your damned Wagner!”

The cashier was wiping his flute with a piece of flannel. He shook his head and said nothing. M. Coulandot turned to me:

“And you, Mademoiselle Claire, do you like Chopin?”

I wished I could express what I’d felt, but he looked at me so authoritatively that I barely had the strength to open my mouth.

“Why, yes. Very, very much.”

Then we began Beethoven’s trio. It didn’t make the same impression on me as the Chopin trio. Ignorant as I was, I could tell that I was hearing music that was broader, clearer, more serene, more classical. Nothing struck me, and nothing disconcerted me. It was like an immense sea, calm and powerful, enveloping me without frightening me. As ten o’clock struck, a discreet knock sounded at the door. In his booming voice, M. Coulandot shouted:

“Come in!”

And Mademoiselle Mélanie showed up.

With a shy gesture, she excused herself for disturbing the concert for a minute and prayed that no one would notice her arrival. She tiptoed to an armchair, sank gently into it and, with her hands clasped and her hat a little askew, listened, raising and lowering her head to follow the rhythm. M. Coulandot continued to beat time with his foot; from time to time, when M. Henry ran out of breath, the flute fell silent; M. Coulandot gave his cashier a disapproving look; M. Henry wiped his lips, then the mouthpiece of his instrument, and blew again. The trio was played a second time, M. Coulandot judging that it had been played too badly the first time. He was a terrible man: you always had to do what he wanted; Madame Coulandot obeyed him like a child, and M. Henry, who yawned in secret, if he always started by protesting, always ended by acquiescing. As for Mademoiselle Berthe, we could have played all night long: a municipal brass band wouldn’t have kept her awake. From time to time, Mademoiselle Mélanie would let out a little sigh of delight.

“That’s enough for today,” said Coulandot at last.

Mademoiselle Mélanie immediately rushed to ask M. Coulandot and his wife for news, as if she hadn't seen them for days. She also wondered if they weren't angry with her for entering while a magnificent piece was being performed; but she wouldn't have been able to rest all night if she hadn't heard some music before going up to her room. She was reassured. Madame Coulandot carefully laid the embroidered band on the keyboard, while M. Coulandot laid the violin in its box and M. Henry put the flute in its case. Madame Coulandot then pressed a small button on the wall.

A few minutes passed and the maid appeared carrying a tray bearing six glasses, a carafe of water and a bottle of grenadine. Madame Coulandot filled the glasses. M. Coulandot swallowed his in one gulp and clicked his tongue to attest to the excellence of the syrup. Mademoiselle Mélanie drank slowly, as did Mademoiselle Berthe.

"And now it's time for bed!" exclaimed M. Coulandot when we had put our glasses back on the tray.

He wished us good evening; Madame Coulandot kissed my forehead, and I followed the old ladies up the stairs.

As I undressed, Mademoiselle Mélanie called out to me:

"Mademoiselle Claire!"

I turned around:

"What is it, mademoiselle?"

"You'll have to get up tomorrow at half past six."

"Good," I said.

"I'll wake you. Like all young girls, your duty is to sleep soundly and wake with difficulty."

She did the same things in the room as the previous evening, in the same order. The light was snuffed out, leaving us in almost pitch darkness. I was already lying in bed when she walked over to me in her nightshirt, and raising a finger in the air:

"Monsieur Coulandot is a great artist."

Then, without waiting for a reply, she slipped away to her bed and got under the sheets.

IV

EVERYONE was eager to ease my initial boredom at first. M. Coulandot had put me in the fabric department on the first floor, under the direction of Mademoiselle Mélanie. As I was the youngest, I was the first to go down to the store at half past seven, and while the boys swept and dusted, I waited in vain for any early-morning buyers who might have turned up. At eight o'clock, the employees entered. Mademoiselle Mélanie immediately lined up the chairs parallel to the wall, then examined my outfit and hairstyle; she criticised the natural wave of my hair and the small flounce of my skirt with regularity, but without ill humour: a store girl had to be careful to avoid all coquetry, so as never to appear better dressed or prettier than a customer. As there were few sales in the mornings, she taught me the different prices of fabrics, but above all she used me to run errands around the store: she sent me to the cash register, to the second floor, to Mademoiselle Berthe, to the dressmaking shop...

"Ask Monsieur Henry... Look for this in the assortment."

Noon struck; the clerks and apprentices were leaving. At half past, Mademoiselle Mélanie turned to me:

"Now," she said, "let's go upstairs for lunch."

At the table, she recommended a modest air, complete submission to the boss, to her, then to the other employees, absolute respect for the hierarchy, constant approval, if not by word, at least by attitude, of everything M. Coulandot or his wife might say.

"See how at dinner I adjust my appetite to that of Madame Coulandot."

She would ask me about my past life and, in the hope of winning her good graces and in obedience to Father Guérand, I would tell her everything she wanted to know. I didn't receive a letter from my parents without informing her, I referred everything to her experience, and as she jealously guarded the rights conferred on her by her seniority, my self-interested tributes filled her heart. In the afternoon, the customers arrived: civil servants' and officers'

wives, aristocratic old ladies, petite bourgeoises, who often didn't even know what they wanted and sat for two or three hours in front of the counter.

Climbing on a stepladder, I would remove the coupons from the shelves. Some days, fifty or a hundred pieces of fabric would pile up on top of each other, jumbled, rolled up, scattered on the floor, and I'd never have managed to separate and fold them without the help of the apprentices.

In the evening, at dinner, M. Coulandot would encourage me with a few gruff words. He always gave me an irrational fright.

After three or four weeks, people soon forgot that I was "the new girl" except to impose on me the most onerous tasks. Even the apprentices gave me orders. Since I'd told Mademoiselle Mélanie everything about my life, and she'd given me all the advice I needed, there was nothing to fuel our conversations. No doubt she believed that I had ceased to confide in her out of disdain or animosity; her keen awareness of her early kindnesses to me made her accuse me of the blackest ingratitude. So, she took her revenge in a hundred small ways. In the bedroom, she complained incessantly that my presence interfered with her every action; she was no longer at home, I was upsetting her habits, disturbing even the symmetry of the furniture. One evening, when she had left us immediately after dinner, I found her shaving the hairs on her chin.

She never forgave me for catching her in such a comical situation, and became a bitter, devious enemy forever after. I was no longer Claire, but Mademoiselle Claire, and the simple "Mademoiselle" that fell from her lips stung me like a wounding irony. In the store, if I spoke with an employee, she called me back to silence more curtly than a maid. If I stood motionless in a corner, she'd immediately discover the most tiresome task for me to do. She would answer M. Coulandot's questions about my progress with desolate gestures. M. Coulandot would nod, adjust his shawl, and return to his office. All my goodwill vanished: no matter how hard I worked, Mademoiselle Mélanie blamed me. Everyone imitated her: I was scolded from morning to night like a child, reproached for my foolishness, blamed for my pride. I hated a job that bored and humiliated me. Every day, I did exactly the same things over and over again. The monotony of my work led me to look for ways not to do it, and the horror of my subjection made me so hateful to my customers that, to avoid serving them, I always managed to get

away from my department.

M. Coulandot, well-informed though he was, remained silent. Finally, one day as I was folding the coupons shown in the afternoon, he stopped in front of me; I was folding them very badly, as fatigue was numbing my limbs. He turned abruptly to Mademoiselle Mélanie and shrugged his shoulders:

“We can’t do anything with her!”

Mademoiselle Mélanie waved her arms in despair.

“I think we’ll have to send her back to her parents,” said M. Coulandot.

From then on, I lived under the constant threat of dismissal, of which Mademoiselle Mélanie never failed to remind me.

A visit from Madame Aubin at the end of May further strengthened her low opinion of me. One afternoon, around two o’clock, a large, bloated lady, brunette, dressed in red, followed by a small, stooped man with a pointed beard, who was carefully holding a silver-billed umbrella, entered the store. All the employees looked at her as if she were a curiosity. She pushed her way up to the cashier, staring at apprentices and young ladies alike, then retraced her steps with astonished gestures. Mademoiselle Mélanie asked what she wanted. The large woman said my name. Mademoiselle Mélanie pointed to me; immediately the woman stepped forward and, grasping my hands over the counter, bent down to kiss me.

“I’m your cousin, Aubin!” she cried.

The little man smiled as he sucked on the tip of his umbrella. I didn’t know what to say or do; this ridiculous, unexpected cousin, with her loud manners and dazzling costume, filled me with confusion. I could hear the muffled laughter around me. But she, unaware of anything, introduced me to her husband, and began a hurried conversation in which I only joined in with monosyllables... She asked me about my father... about my mother... She hadn’t seen them for so many years! What poor people!... She’d invited me to dinner the very day I arrived... In truth, she’d seen me for the first and last time, when I was in my sixth year, and still only briefly... And she explained her kinship: she was a cousin of mine through my father, and, born in Fontaine-Française, she had met her husband there, formerly a student at the École des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, and now a medal engraver. She expressed herself volubly, very loudly, with a cascading laugh and waving arms.

Mademoiselle Mélanie, standing up straight at the end of the counter, never took her eyes off her, her lips contemptuous. Shame filled my face. At last, Madame Aubin embraced me, extracting from me the promise of dinner at her place the following Sunday: her husband, who hadn't opened his mouth, wanted to offer me his right hand and passed his umbrella into his left; the umbrella fell, rolled on the floor... He turned pale. Madame Aubin lost her temper... Finally, they left as they had arrived, she in front, with a solid step; he behind, stretching out his short legs to catch up with her.

Mademoiselle Mélanie approached me:

"I hope this is the last visit these cousins will make to you. This lady's manner would drive away all our customers."

And as M. Henry passed her:

"Have you seen this woman before?" she asked.

But he shook his head without answering. Then Mademoiselle Mélanie disappeared for a few minutes, and as she returned to the aisle, she told me that M. Coulandot was calling for me.

"I understand," he said, "that Madame Aubin was in the store earlier today."

"Yes, sir."

"She's a strange woman... she attracts too much attention... I'd rather you saw her at home. You do see her at home, don't you?"

"I saw her today for the first time."

"The first time!" he exclaimed. "You've been in Dijon for two months! What do you do every Sunday?"

"I went twice to Father Guérand's house. Then I visited the museum and that took me three afternoons."

"Here," he said, his tone less gruff, "you've been to the museum. You're probably the only one of my employees who's ever had that idea. Are you interested?"

"Why, yes."

"It's curious..."

He remained pensive, then continued:

"And do you know anything about art?"

"I don't know. There are just some paintings I like... ones that move me, and I don't think I'll ever tire of contemplating them. I also love old furniture, and the Trimolet collection is admirable."

With his hands flat on the table, his little hat tipped back, M. Coulandot listened to me, as if, mute, I had suddenly recovered the

use of my voice.

"Eventually," he said, "I'll understand you."

Then he added:

"I would have loved to visit the museum with you. I've visited it more than thirty times on my own or with the curator... but you must look at the paintings and statues the way I do, your emotions as your guide... Come now, you weren't meant to sell fabrics."

He spoke to me without anger, softly, with a slight regret in his voice; he no longer frightened me, and I assured him sincerely that I would bring to my work all the zeal of which I was capable.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I see, we mustn't act with you as we would with another employee... Anyway, I do hope it all works out in the end."

As I left the office:

"Will you be seeing your cousin again soon?" he asked.

"She invited me to dinner on Sunday."

"Well," he said, "you mustn't fail to accept this invitation."

In the past, in the countryside, plants and flowers announced the new seasons to me: white hemlocks rose above buttercups, honeysuckle greyed the woods with its dizzying scent, poppies trembled with the sloping wheat, and I said to myself: "It'll soon be summer." Often, I'd bring huge sheaves home and amuse myself by drawing the charming shapes of leaves and corollas on a sheet of paper. Now, M. Coulandot's big voice rang out:

"You'll put the canvas dresses on display tomorrow."

We hung a blind over the shop windows. Every evening, until midnight, often one o'clock in the morning, we cut small rectangular pieces of fabric, glued them between two pieces of cardboard, thus forming the sample books, and I said to myself: "It'll soon be summer." The heat was overwhelming: it was stifling in the store; it was suffocating in the bedrooms. As I had promised M. Coulandot, I tried, if not to earn Mademoiselle Mélanie's praise, which was impossible, at least to justify her observations more rarely. However, there were few customers, and we often remained idle. So, leaning against the counter, I tried to look out through the door onto the street. It was paradise for me, this street, like a chimerical kingdom of freedom, fresh air, and space. I didn't know any of the people who passed along it, apart from Father Guérand, who occasionally walked past the store. Once or twice, I thought I recognised Mademoiselle Madeleine Alquier in a carriage; the horse

was trotting fast, but I must have been mistaken. Then one afternoon, the carriage stopped in front of the door and Madeleine Alquier entered, accompanied by her governess. How pretty she looked! Sporting a large, contoured straw headdress encircled by a ribbon, she wore a pink linen bodice with a slight indentation; her hair spread in curls over her shoulders, and a Holy Spirit rhinestone dangling from a gold chain shone in the hollow of her throat. The mere sight of her beauty inundated me with joy. Mademoiselle Mélanie hurried over, for Mademoiselle Alquier belonged to one of the richest and oldest families in the country; but the young girl kindly replied that she'd only come to see me. How proud I felt! She spoke to me at length, as if with a friend; she pitied me so deliciously that I wished I'd been even more miserable just to listen to her worry over me longer.

M. Coulandot rushed towards her.

"You didn't know," said Mademoiselle Alquier, "that Mademoiselle Claire was my friend?"

"No, no," he said, "she never said anything."

"Well," she resumed, "you don't have a single customer. Let her go out with me."

He didn't dare refuse.

Once in the car, she arranged my dress, crumpled one fold, crumpled another, lowered my hair, raised my hat:

"You look lovely like this," she said.

First, she took me to a pastry shop for a taste, then to some antique shops to buy some old furniture. She did a couple more errands and gave me a black tie with white lace to brighten up my dress. She took me back to the store, and at the door she kissed me. It wasn't my pride that was exalted by the affection she showed me, but my heart, because she had immediately found the way to it and guessed all the suppressed tenderness it contained. And I suffered to leave her, for I knew too well how rarely life would bring us together. For two or three days, this visit shook my torpor and that of the store. Everyone complimented me: in the evening, at dinner, I had to tell everyone how long I'd known Mademoiselle Alquier.

"She's not proud," giggled Mademoiselle Berthe.

Mademoiselle Alquier returned twice more, and in September she travelled to Italy; but from Italy she still sent me postcards every week, which I showed to the whole store out of vanity.

Chance changed my situation. At the beginning of October, M.

Coulandot, who was searching in vain for Mademoiselle Berthe, came across me on the second floor.

"Well," he said, "since Mademoiselle Berthe has disappeared, why don't you pick out a dozen of the prettiest samples in this package for me?"

How many times had I been told that I was good for nothing! I spread out the whole batch of samples on the floor, turning them over and over, examining them in every conceivable way, up close and from afar, and finally arranging twelve of them separately.

M. Coulandot looked at the samples.

"Why," he exclaimed, "it's perfect. You've chosen exactly the prettiest ones."

He took them away, then called me into his office the next day.

"I was right," he said, "you're not cut out to sell cloth. You've tried faithfully to keep your promise, but you must love what you do to do it well. You need another department. Mademoiselle Berthe, who is alone on the second floor, has too much work. You have great taste. Starting tomorrow, you'll be overseeing silks."

Emotion prevented me from thanking M. Coulandot, and while she approved, Mademoiselle Mélanie treacherously feared that I might be as nonchalant in the silk department as I was in the fabric department. M. Coulandot, impatient, replied that he was never wrong twice. She remained silent until evening; but in the dining room, she joined me, and fixed her little eyes on me:

"I'm delighted that you're leaving me," she said, "and I feel sorry for Mademoiselle Berthe."

But what do I care about this unbridled anger? I'm now the owner of a department and, what's more, my own mistress, for Mademoiselle Berthe, far from seeing me as her collaborator and concerned only with making my task more difficult, gives me no advice whatsoever. However, I wasn't lulled into such high hopes; I feared some new authority.

How little it takes to enchant a young soul! Mademoiselle Alquier sent me books, and Father Guérand lent me some. As Mademoiselle Mélanie complained incessantly about sharing her room, M. Coulandot, perhaps overawed by her moaning, cleared away the boxes cluttering up a small cabinet squeezed between the two old girls' bedrooms, and set up a bed, a table, an armchair and a chest of drawers for me. A room all to myself! What bliss those poor words contained, and what a palace that poor room would be,

where Mademoiselle Mélanie no longer rested her emaciated body, where I no longer heard her breathe! I decorated it as best I could, with bouquets, engravings, and fabrics; it became almost pretty. Such mediocre events were transforming my existence. At the store, in my spare time, I practiced copying flowers, as I had done at Gernin, and then tried to reproduce their colours with silk. Flowers have always moved me, not for their fragrance, but for their shapes and nuances. The narrow, serrated leaf of the dandelion, the ranunculus with its large golden pools, the rigid grace of the narcissus, the elegance of the poppy, all move me with ingenuous admiration. In the evenings, I read in my room. In vain I tried to hide my light; it filtered under the parapet, and when eleven o'clock struck, Mademoiselle Mélanie, furious, shouted at me to turn it off, then, when I didn't obey, became indignant and threatened me. So, I locked up. She complained to M. Coulandot, and he advised her to leave me alone. Mademoiselle Berthe, who pretended to be unaware of my existence, was nevertheless concerned enough to inspect my room when I wasn't there, and I caught her one day absorbed in leafing through my books. Miseries I laughed at! I read without method, a kind of madness dominating me.

"You shouldn't tire yourself out too much with your reading, Mademoiselle Claire," said M. Coulandot.

I was expecting reproaches.

"Come, come... I'm not going to stop you learning. Just take it easy."

A few days later, around seven o'clock, as I was arranging my shelf, he stopped in front of me. One of my embroideries, a garland of large yellow water lilies, was lying on the counter.

"What are you doing here, Mademoiselle Claire?"

He was somewhat critical of the design, which he considered soft and inaccurate, but praised the colours of the silks.

"Ah! you have talent. It's a shame I can't use it here."

He nodded and examined the embroidery again:

"Do you know what we should do together?

"No."

"Well, from time to time, on Sundays, we should visit the sights of the city, the museum, the Palais des Ducs, the Chartreuse de Champmol."

I was about to answer, to accept, but he warned me with a gesture:

“Think about it first. See if it doesn’t bother you.”

And he ran to get dressed, for that evening he was dining out.

Mademoiselle Berthe leaned her puffy face towards me.

“You’re very happy now, Mademoiselle Claire, aren’t you?” she said in her timbreless voice.

“Yes,” I replied, very happy.

And the sound of my indifferent words frightened me, as if the ironic fragility and insignificance of the fever I’d been igniting and mistaking for happiness suddenly appeared to me.

V

PUT another log on the fire," said Father Guérand to the maid. "This December rain is freezing cold."

Back home from Vespers, he took off his wet coat and put his cold-reddened hands to the fire.

"Well," he said, "Monsieur Coulandot's son is setting himself up as an architect in Dijon. I saw him this morning. A tall boy with soft dark eyes. How old is he?"

"Twenty-seven."

"How well do you know him?"

"He's a good friend of mine. During the Easter vacations, he showed me sympathy straight away. A few conversations brought us closer together. He seems younger than me, almost a teenager, and he often asks me for my opinion, like an older sister."

"Look, Mademoiselle Claire, you're an important person now. Monsieur Coulandot likes you now. You're no longer the poor employee of those first few months. You astonish him now, you beguile him. He lends you books, shows you around town, chats with you; you satisfy certain needs of his intelligence. His son is fond of you. Madame Coulandot must cherish you like a daughter. No doubt the old ladies hate you as much as you hate them. But this feeling delights your pride. How humiliating it would be if Mademoiselle Mélanie loved you!"

The rain was still falling; already the rare glow of day was dimming, and Father Guérand lit a lamp.

"Monsieur Coulandot," he said, "has a great influence on your mind."

"No," I said briskly.

He closed the window curtains, put the lamp on the desk and returned to the fireplace.

"He does! You're no longer pious, my child. For several weeks now I've been looking for you in vain at Mass on Sundays. You don't go anymore, do you?"

I inclined my head.

"Why? Is it weariness? Is it the effect of a new conviction? I'm

guessing Monsieur Coulandot…”

“Oh, Monsieur Coulandot has never tried to win me over to his ideas. He’s just honest, good, and fair. He’s like you, Father. He does good without worrying about the beliefs of those he obliges. He’s the most tolerant of men. He gives me the same advice as you. But he’s not religious. So, I thought…”

“Well?” he said a little rudely.

“I thought it was possible to practice virtue without being pious.”

“Have I ever taught you otherwise, my child? Devotees sometimes elevate wickedness to the highest degree. Too many Christians convince themselves that all it takes to merit divine grace is the mechanical repetition of a Rosary. But I also believe that men like Monsieur Coulandot are very rare. We are nothing but weakness. God’s love gives us the strength we lack, and there are always moments in life when the most unbelieving reach for heaven… Anyway, since you’re happy…”

“Happy!” I cried. “Oh, I’m not happy!”

He looked at me, stunned:

“Aren’t you happy?”

“There’s no happiness without freedom. You are free. I—”

“Free, my poor child! Not only am I everyone’s servant, I have terrible masters, masters who don’t live in France, and who tomorrow, if it pleases my bishop, will reject me from the Church, without allowing me to defend myself. I’m free! But you depend on Monsieur Coulandot, and he is your friend. You used to suffer the animosity of two old maids and now you’re their equal. The people you serve, the customers, are polite, kind even…”

“I’m not free. I can’t do what I want… I’m condemned to a life I hate…”

“No one can do what they want, my child, not even those who command others. And as for your life—”

I interrupted:

“I know too well what day by day she will be until death. She frightens me.”

“You’re wrong. Happiness lies in a simple, regular, almost systematic life. I’ve lived this way, performing the same acts every day: praying to God, saying Mass, confessing, singing Vespers, helping the sick to die. I remember, in Burgundy, in a village, in a small square that was always deserted, a small house with a single

floor and a sloping roof and tiny windows with white curtains. One evening, at dusk, behind the parted curtain, I caught sight of an old woman. Her hands clasped, her face motionless, she stared at this place where nothing was happening. The next day, at noon, she was there again. She'd been there all day. A black bonnet topped her white hair, a delicate softness lit up her face, and her eyes were as pure as a child's. The whole of her existence had unfolded. Her whole life had been spent in this village. The great agitations of the world, which are so miserable, did not reach her home. She looked out over meadows, a river, a small solitary square. The church steeple gravely marked all the monotonous hours of her life. She possessed happiness, because happiness lies within ourselves, in the peace of our soul."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "This is not happiness. She hasn't suffered, she hasn't felt desire or regret, her heart hasn't beaten with any emotion."

"For you, happiness means suffering!"

"Happiness is living. You can't live without suffering. But I envy those who suffer *because* they live."

Hands clasped in a desolate gesture, Father Guérand lowered his eyes. Never had I given him so much of myself, for if my bitter passion for freedom didn't hide from his intelligence, he was at least unaware of my imperious need to embrace the whole of life. Books, which had enchanted me, wearied or irritated me today: they proved to me too cruelly the emptiness of days gone by. As a romantic, I was consumed by dreams of a fanciful future. But the dream, too, was too much for me. What are the most wonderful dreams worth compared to simple reality!

"What could you possibly want?" asked Father Guérand.

"Everything, since I have nothing."

He nodded and said slowly:

"Women always claim they have nothing if they don't have love."

And I understood that he was reading my heart, just as I was reading it.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. A voice asked for Father Guérand...

The maid shouted:

"Wait for me, wait for me!"

The cabinet door was pushed open violently. A man stood on the threshold, young, about thirty, tall, robust, with hard eyes, a

tormented face, and a bitter crease in his mouth, but elegant in body and dress.

"Don't you recognise me, Father?" he said.

Father Guérand raised the lamp to the height of the figure:

"Lucien," he said. "Lucien!"

Then they embraced and kissed one another's cheeks.

"But how long have you been in Dijon?"

"Since this morning, and I think for good."

"Ah, so much the better!" sighed Father Guérand.

He remembered I was there.

"Monsieur Lucien Lamastre," he said. "Mademoiselle Claire Fournier."

The young man turned his head towards me and nodded in acknowledgment. Father Guérand rested his hand on the man's shoulder and addressed me:

"Here's one, my poor child, who has lived and regrets it."

The young man was no longer looking at me. As I was afraid of embarrassing them, I returned to M. Coulandot's store.

VI

IT'S Sunday evening at dinner: M. Coulandot is carving a roast, elbows apart, and with his knife clenched in his fist, he's talking about the Lamastres. Mademoiselle Berthe, who knows the most distant origins of the Dijon families, sometimes adds a few words; Mademoiselle Mélanie observes her boss with the most interested air, and Madame Coulandot nods.

"The Lamastres are one of Dijon's oldest and most devout families. The father died two years ago. He was very strict with his son. He never allowed him to go out alone, didn't let him socialise with any friends his own age, didn't exempt him from any religious practices. His only Sunday entertainment was a walk in the park. Then, at twenty, he sent him to Paris to study law. In a matter of hours, this boy found himself freed from a veritable slavery and absolutely free. An aunt had left him a small fortune. He was hungry for pleasure. In a few months, he had devoured everything he owned. So, he went into debt... There are even other stories. It was said that his father had died of grief..."

Why did I tell M. Coulandot that I'd met Lucien Lamastre that afternoon at Father Guérand's home, and why did I ask him about a person who should be a complete stranger to me? My thoughts took me back to the study, lit by both the still light of the lamp and the glow of the fire; the Father and his friend were standing next to each other; and everything became clear again, from the gesture with which the priest laid his hand on the young man's shoulder to the words he uttered: "Here is one, my poor child, who has lived and regrets it." He had lived! How mysterious and profound those words were! For a woman, it didn't seem possible that she could live if she didn't have a great love: but for a man, what was it to live? I sensed that men don't understand it the way women do, and I understood all too clearly that not a single love had reigned over Lucien Lamastre's heart. How many fragile loves were there in these past years? No doubt another young girl would have repressed her instinctive disgust. Alas, this life lost entirely in the worst pleasures inspired no horror in me: on the contrary, I envied the fever that

had animated it and the kind of madness with which it had burned. Of all those around me, none could maintain that they were alive, not even Father Guérand or M. Coulandot: the most meticulous exactitude regulated the smallest incidents of their uniform days. While I was condemned to the most monotonous of existences, a man appeared to me who knew everything about life, even its shames: I'd seen him for barely a few minutes, and already he was preoccupying my reclusive imagination in quite an exceptional way.

How ridiculous and pitiful! This man meant nothing to me, and I longed to know why he had returned to Dijon, what regrets he carried with him, and what plans he had for the future. Curiosity brought me back on the next Sunday to Father Guérand's; but Father Guérand avoided any allusion to a subject that concerned me so deeply:

"You've known Monsieur Lamastre a long time," I said, growing bold.

He replied:

"Yes... He was poorly brought up. He's coming back to Dijon because he's wasted his fortune. He's going to live with his mother. The poor boy! Anyway, I hope all goes well."

I couldn't get any more information out of him.

It was Christmas. Church bells rang out across the city, spreading their jubilation across the white sky, where a chilly sun shimmered, and then the first snow fell. M. Coulandot drew up his annual inventory. Mademoiselle Mélanie, following an old habit, attended Mass every morning for nine days, thanking God for the year that was over and begging him to bless the next.

The store was perpetually full. On New Year's Eve, M. Coulandot gave each of us a bonus. Was it the fatigue of the last week, due to the crowds of buyers, the irritation of their requests, the confusion of their orders and their recriminations? Was it the simple triumph of reason? It never occurred to me for a minute to think about Lucien Lamastre. When I took my vows to Father Guérand, I didn't even imagine that this young man would be at home.

I entered the study. Lucien Lamastre was standing by the window, and I felt a mixture of anger and spite. At first, it seemed to me that he was taking the place in this house that belonged to me, and what's more, I resented the fact that he was still imposing himself on my attention. On the table was a bottle of port, some biscuits and two small glasses: Father Guérand was drinking with

his friend to the New Year. I had bought him a sheaf of roses. Droplets of moisture remained where the vendor had sprayed them.

"How beautiful these roses are!" said Lucien Lamastre.

At the same time, he lifted, the better to examine them. I hated that he admired these flowers and had touched them.

"You have to put them in a vase right away," I said to Father Guérand.

And I pulled back the sheaf quickly, holding it closer. The maid knocked on the door. A patient on Rue Jeannin was asking for Father Guérand right away: he began to leave immediately.

"Wait here for me," he said. "It's nearby."

And so, we were left alone. I found a suitable vase, inserted the flowers, and sat down on the sofa.

I was leafing through a book; we were silent, but Lucien Lamastre's gaze was on me.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, mademoiselle," he said at last, "that you've known Father Guérand?"

His voice was soft, almost caressing. How could such a soft voice come from such a hard mouth? I replied:

"A very long time."

"It's the same for me. He was a parish priest in a village where my parents owned property, and he prepared me for my First Communion. What a holy man! I heard a lot about saints as a child, and I could only imagine them in the guise of Father Guérand."

As I remained silent, he continued:

"I rarely saw him after that. My parents reproached him for having too broad an outlook. He was too indulgent, too lenient..."

I raised my head this time, against my will perhaps. At this hour, I still can't explain what I was feeling: a sort of exasperation because I was alone with him and he was starting to confide in me, then a great pleasure in listening to his voice, and an extreme discomfort that made my gestures uncertain and oppressed my speech.

"Yes," I said. "I like him very much, too."

"I know," he said. "Father Guérand told me all about you... Oh, I'm the one to blame. You were the first person I met at his house... My apologies. Quite naturally... I asked him: 'Who was that young lady?' He answered me... he was delighted to praise you..."

Sudden astonishment flashed across my face.

"Do you blame me for this indiscretion?" he asked.

“Why no, of course not,” I said, affecting a perfect indifference.

As I reached for my jacket folded over on a chair, he stepped forward:

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes, it’s late.”

“Would you like to give me your hand?”

I held out my fingertips.

Outside, I looked up at the house—he was at the window—and I regretted this mechanical motion that he could easily have misinterpreted.

VII

HOW much this event would have upset me if another object hadn't occupied my imagination! To tell the truth, I did feel some turmoil within myself, but, having been interested for a few weeks in a novel whose hero was Louis Coulandot, I was unaware of all that was going on in my heart. Since his return to Dijon, Louis Coulandot had been dark and nervous. He had one of those natures dominated by the need to confide in others. And who would he confide in? He dreaded his father's rudeness, his mother was incapable of giving him advice, and he found the old maids equally unappealing. He told me quite naturally, because I was young, a little sad too, and he guessed that I loved love, a very simple story. In spite of my reproaches, he refused to reveal it to his father; he was desolate at all hours of the day, in the store, near me, showing me the letters that were written to him, and the letters that he sent. How these whispered confidences enchanted me, innumerable and yet always identical! I hardly thought that our long conversations could arouse any attention.

One Saturday in February, M. Coulandot called me into his office and asked me, in a brusque tone that poorly disguised a worried mood, to get Father Guérand to receive him the next day.

"You'll go to his house this afternoon... you'll insist... it's very urgent."

Father Guérand, astonished as he was by this visit, asked me to tell M. Coulandot that he would receive him after High Mass. I wasn't present at this interview, but Father Guérand gave me such a detailed account of it that I can reconstruct it with complete accuracy.

Around eleven o'clock, as Father Guérand was coming and going in his study, the maid, whom he had forgotten to warn, announced M. Coulandot with astonishment. M. Coulandot, hat in hand, frock coat buttoned, stepped into the room and stopped.

"Hello, Father," he said.

"Hello, Monsieur Coulandot."

M. Coulandot and Father Guérand looked at each other for a

moment. M. Coulandot, a little embarrassed to find himself there, alone with a priest, in a room so different from the ones he used to live in, turned his eyes away from the large ivory crucifix, then fixed them on Father Guérand despite himself. Father Guérand smiled; M. Coulandot smiled back.

“Aren’t we going to shake hands, Monsieur Coulandot?” said Father Guérand.

“Oh, gladly, Father,” said M. Coulandot.

They had shaken hands, but this first sign of courtesy still didn’t bring them very close.

“Lay your hat on the table,” said Father Guérand.

M. Coulandot obeyed. He also took off his black gloves, for he had put them on as required by the solemnity of this visit. However, he still lacked his usual ease, and to stall, he examined the room.

“You are well accommodated, Father,” he said. Then, as large snowflakes fell in a hurry and turned the fir trees in the square all white, he added:

“What bad weather!”

“It’s winter,” said Father Guérand with a conciliatory gesture.

“It’s winter,” repeated M. Coulandot with an approving gesture.

There was a new silence. Father Guérand showed M. Coulandot to an armchair by the fireplace; M. Coulandot sat down; the abbot, his hands in his cassock pockets, leaned against the table.

“Well, Monsieur Coulandot?”

These simple words, spoken in a good, straightforward voice, destroyed the last of M. Coulandot’s embarrassment. He no longer saw the black robe he loathed, but only that gnarled peasant figure leaning towards him, and, instead of a priest, a man like him, of the same origin.

“Well, Father, Mademoiselle Claire told you that I wished to speak to you...”

“Yes...”

“You have influence over her, you direct her...”

“Oh no, sir, I have no influence over her. Her pride wouldn’t accept anyone’s influence. Nor do I lead her, for I’ve never led a single one of my parishioners. She was pious when she came to Dijon, now she’s not... You can see what I’ve done... Therefore, it must be Mademoiselle Claire...”

“Yes, it’s her I want to talk to you about...”

Father Guérand couldn’t hide his deep shock. When I had

informed him of M. Coulandot's desire, we hadn't assumed it was about me. We simply assumed that M. Coulandot was seeking the Father's help for a noble cause.

"I like her very much, Mademoiselle Claire," M. Coulandot said immediately, as if to reassure the Father. "For the first few months, I didn't know her... I didn't think much of her... Now I know what she's worth..."

"But what do you want to tell me about her?" interrupted Father Guérand.

"Well," he said with effort, "I have a son who's been an architect in Dijon since last October... He and Mademoiselle Claire have always been good friends... Only I'm afraid their friendship..."

"Well?"

"I'm afraid their friendship is now becoming love."

"Are you sure you're not mistaken, Monsieur Coulandot?"

A sudden flush of redness covered M. Coulandot's face.

"No, Father, I don't think so, and here's what's happening. I hadn't noticed anything: it was my oldest store girl, Mademoiselle Mélanie, who warned me. She's a good, honest girl... she used to work for the Martin brothers... I'm well aware that she and Mademoiselle Claire don't get on very well... but Mademoiselle Mélanie can't lie. Since December, my son has been pursuing every opportunity to be alone with Mademoiselle Claire. Very often, on weekdays, after dinner, they both linger in the dining room. Mademoiselle Mélanie would sometimes come in, and they'd immediately fall silent. My son even comes into the store during the day, chats with Mademoiselle Claire in a low voice, leaves when customers arrive and returns as soon as they've gone. Finally, he keeps handing her letters, and Mademoiselle Claire returns the gesture with her own."

Father Guérand had listened attentively to this story. Arms folded, he pondered. M. Coulandot, with his frock coat open, his hands bulging out of his trouser pockets, his legs stretched wide, was on his feet. Father Guérand remembered our most recent conversations and was very concerned to hear of me so ardently longing to live—that is, to love—not to fear that my heart might indeed be beating with love for this young man. All the evidence M. Coulandot brought to bear struck him. But he still hesitated... If I loved, I'd been loving for at least six or seven weeks; so why should I have wished with all my might for a happiness that, according to

M. Coulandot, I already possessed?

"And what do you want from me?"

"I'd like to be sure they really love each other. Oh, I'm not opposed to a marriage between Mademoiselle Claire and my son because she's a store girl and he's an architect. But if they're just having a fling, I won't tolerate my son turning his head at one of my employees. If, on the contrary, they have a deep feeling for each other, I'll demand that they admit it, because it's an honest feeling, and I'll favor it. No doubt I dreamed of another marriage for my son, but I will never sacrifice my child's happiness for his fortune."

"And why don't you question them yourself?" said Father Guérand. "One is your son and the other your employee."

"And that's precisely why," said M. Coulandot, waving his arms. "I can't question them myself. A son never confides absolutely in his father. Even less an employee in her boss... But both have a friend for whom nothing is a secret. You are Mademoiselle Claire's friend... Besides, I wouldn't be very skillful... I'm gruff... violent even... And you're used to probing souls."

"Well, I promise to talk to Mademoiselle Claire this very day, if she stops by."

Saint-Bénigne's bell tower rang at midday. It was still snowing. From time to time, in the square, a fir branch, overloaded with snow, bent and dropped its burden. Saint-Michel answered Saint-Bénigne, and the twin jacquemarts of Notre-Dame hammered out the twelve strokes.

"It's the *Angelus*, Monsieur Coulandot," said Father Guérand, signing himself.

"Well," said M. Coulandot, "I'll be leaving you, Father. Thank you very much."

As the abbot led him away, he stopped at the door and, shaking his hand:

"Ah!" he said, "if all priests were like you!"

"If only all freethinkers were like you!" replied Father Guérand.

M. Coulandot simply said to me at lunch:

"I saw Father Guérand this morning."

Then, as his son was having lunch with us, he took him straight away after coffee. I dined at the Aubins'. It was a gloomy February afternoon; the snow had stopped falling. What could I do until seven o'clock except visit the old priest? He was quite absorbed when I arrived.

“What are you thinking about, Father?”

“You, my child. I was reminded today of a conversation we had in December. You weren’t happy. You wanted to live. And I wonder if you’ll ever find what you dream of, or if, wiser, you’ll settle for a normal life. An old priest has the right to ask: do you love someone?”

He thinks I love Lucien Lamastre. That was my first thought. What other reason could there be for Father Guérand to ask me such a question? So, I answered in a voice that should have calmed him:

“I don’t love anyone.”

“You don’t love Louis Coulandot?”

In a second, everything became clear.

My long talks with Louis, his visits to the store, had worried M. Coulandot. Why, maybe I *wanted* to marry his son! M. Coulandot, no matter how detached from prejudice he usually asserted himself, was only concerned with ruining such an ambition, even before it had been expressed. The freethinker sought the priest’s alliance: he didn’t dare address me directly, in all sincerity; he stooped to roundabout, almost shameful means...

“You can reassure Monsieur Coulandot,” I replied angrily, “I don’t love his son and his son doesn’t love me.”

“Calm yourself, my child. That’s what Monsieur Coulandot came to talk to me about this morning. He thought his son loved you, and that perhaps you loved him as well. He was reluctant to question you himself, precisely because he’s your boss. You’re often with his son, it seems, you talk together, you exchange letters... Mademoiselle Mélanie saw you...”

“Mademoiselle Mélanie, naturally! Well?”

“Don’t get angry. Just listen. Monsieur Coulandot simply wanted information. He was afraid his son wanted to... seduce you... Well, that’s that, the word is out!”

“That poor boy! That’s not how it is at all...”

“But if it were certain that a sincere love would draw you together, it would create no obstacle to your marriage.”

“He told you that?” I exclaimed. “So, he wouldn’t object to a store girl marrying his son, an architect?”

“But no.”

“Ah, how happy I am!”

“You like it!”

“Of course not, no! The truth is this: during the last few months

he lived in Paris, Louis Coulandot met a young girl, a salesgirl at Le Bon Marché... She came from a humble family, very good people in fact. She didn't have a cent, but she was charming. He fell in love with her, she fell in love with him... But they love each other honestly. Louis, now that he's settled in Dijon, loves her more. Only he's afraid of his father. He chose me as his confidante. He showed me the letters he wrote and those he received. How many times I advised him to confess everything to his father! He's a fearful person. He was convinced that his father would never admit the possibility of this marriage. Ah! Mademoiselle Mélanie will be furious!"

The forthcoming shame of Mademoiselle Mélanie brought me such joy that I forgot my unjust indignation against M. Coulandot and even the future happiness of Louis and his girlfriend. Father Guérand restored my spirits. Then he told me all about the morning's meeting. As the day wore on, the maid closed the curtains; Father Guérand was enjoying his work at this hour, and I was looking forward to telling Louis the good news. It was raining; I didn't have an umbrella, and as I turned the corner to go back to Father Guérand's, I bumped into Lucien Lamastre. I gasped and apologised, but he bowed and said:

"Allow me to accompany you and give you shelter from this rain."

Spontaneously, I replied:

"Certainly, I don't mind."

And I walked beside him.

It didn't occur to me to refuse him, because I didn't think for a second that I might be doing the wrong thing by accepting. He held his umbrella high, so as not to touch my hat, and leaned it forward as the rain poured down on us. My boots slipped on the wet cobblestone and he quickly, yet gently, grabbed my arm to steady me. When a mud puddle lay on the pavement, he would take my hand, so that I could step over it. We didn't speak. My eyes could only make out the gentle face of the young architect, and an inner voice kept repeating to me: *How could they think I loved Louis Coulandot?* It was a short walk from Place des Ducs to Rue des Godrans. We were soon within walking distance of the store. As I thanked Lucien Lamastre for his kindness, he looked at me so imperiously that I bowed my head in sudden weakness. It only lasted a moment. Did he know what I was feeling? He waved and

left. He made his way up Rue de la Liberté through the groups of people crowding the sidewalk, sometimes forced to step down onto the road. The lights made it easy for me to follow him. It seemed to me that I hated him for having felt his will stronger than mine. He disappeared, and I realised that I had stayed outside the house, just to see him as long as possible... I was afraid to love him.

VIII

YES, I loved him very early on... Now I realise that by fearing to love him, I was already loving him, and that there was no longer any point in fearing. How did I love him, why did I love him? I don't know anymore... I saw him, he hardly spoke to me, everything I learned from him should have kept me away... and already my heart was beating faster... he wasn't handsome, his face was often dark, and always tormented, with hard eyes, a bitter mouth, but his commanding gaze dominated me. I didn't know if he loved me. And yet, the day after he'd driven me to the store, around noon, he passed by Rue de la Liberté and looked up at the second floor. I happened to be at the window; he greeted me, and I greeted him back. The next day, he passed by at the same time; I was still at the window, but no longer by chance. From then on, he came by every day. Every Sunday, I went to Father Guérand's house. Lucien Lamastre was also there; he usually arrived half an hour after me and stayed until I left. Sometimes, he would accompany me for a few moments. The three of us talked about fairly general things. *He doesn't love me,* I would say to myself. And I remembered his indifferent phrases and the frigid air with which he pronounced them. Why indeed would he love me, and what could I be to him? But then I thought: *He loves me, he loves me!* Why did he pass by the store every day if he didn't love me, and come to Father Guérand's every Sunday?

One afternoon in March, Father Guérand was called to see a patient. It was a Sunday. He had to leave Dijon and travel to a remote village; Father Guérand would be away until nightfall.

"What are you doing?" asked Lucien Lamastre.

"The museum's close," I replied, "so I think I'll go in for a moment."

"Let me go with you."

And so, we visited the museum. Lucien Lamastre walked behind me, never stopping in front of the paintings I was interested in. Some curious people wandered through the painting rooms. Only in the Salle des Gardes were we alone. Then he moved closer to me.

Oh, he told me nothing that anyone else couldn't overhear. We examined the tombs of Philippe le Hardi and Jean sans Peur; he showed me all the differences, and how the former, with its delicate openwork gallery and the ogival arches of its cloister, surpassed the latter, which was overloaded with ornamentation. He also told me about their turbulent history, the creation of the Chartreuse de Champmol where Philippe le Hardi wanted to establish his burial place and that of his descendants, the stupid fury of the Revolution destroying the marvels thus assembled, and the pious cult of a museum curator reuniting, restoring and saving the forgotten debris. I knew everything he was explaining to me, and yet I listened to him with such particular pleasure that it seemed as if I had been unaware of these details. He said the simplest things in the world, and I found them admirable. Sometimes, as we leaned over to get a better look, we touched each other, and the same confusion seized me—stronger perhaps—as the day he had accompanied me in the rain to the store. Then, as we parted, he said to me, with the accent of a command rather than a request:

"You'll see me on Sunday, won't you?"

I replied:

"I'll see you on Sunday."

And as I offered him my hand, he suddenly raised it to his lips.

That Sunday, as I finished getting dressed, Mademoiselle Berthe knocked on my door:

"Here's a letter," she said. "The messenger gave it to me just a moment ago. I thought you'd like to read it right away." She left after handing it over.

The handwriting on the envelope was unfamiliar to me, yet I could make out the hand that had written it. I laid the letter on the bed. Mademoiselle Berthe returned and walked into the room.

"I can stay, can't I, for a little while? Your room is so well decorated! Are you still embroidering? What a pretty rose!"

Such lively friendliness worried me. Mademoiselle Berthe leaned back against the bed and saw the letter, still closed:

"Ah!" she said, trying to laugh, "you're in no hurry to open your letters!"

"It's a letter from the Aubins; I know what's in it."

She was studying the writing.

"Madame Aubin's handwriting is entirely masculine. Actually, that's not surprising, with her looks, her character..."

“Give it here,” I said.

And as she handed me the letter, I slipped it into my skirt pocket. She smiled that smile so long mysterious to me, where I could now detect, through experience, a cautious hatred mixed with a sly humility.

“I’ll leave,” she said. “I can see I’m in your way.”

I let several minutes elapse before opening the letter, fearing that Mademoiselle Berthe might return on some frivolous pretext. It was indeed from Lucien Lamastre, short, five or six lines at most, and deliberate:

I must see you alone.
I must talk to you.
I’ll be at the park near the river
this evening at five o’clock.
I’ll wait for you until dark.
You will come.

The letter trembled in my fingers and my eyes glazed over. He wasn’t begging, he was ordering, and far from irritating or indignant, these imperative sentences upset me in a different way from the most sentimental confession. He hadn’t even written that he loved me and yet I felt the violent ardor of his love with every word. *He loves me, he loves me!* This was what I repeated in a kind of enchantment; for to me, I loved him so much that I no longer had to wonder at my love. Was I dreaming? After so many tears, so much anger, so many humiliations, love was lighting up this poor attic room! No doubt I’d never despaired of love, but always, alas, of being loved. Ah, how sweet and beautiful it seemed to live that morning! On that sad March morning, the sky was grey, the air cold, the light dark, but no bright summer morning has ever given me such fullness of happiness. On the contrary, there are sunny days, buzzing and light, of which I have neither seen the golden clarity nor felt the joyful fever. We carry within us all the beauty of nature. The sky that day, a winter sky with no sign of the spring so soon to come, remains the most magnificent in my memory. My heart filled my chest, the blood flowed richer in my veins, a strange strength invaded me that would have made me capable of the wildest heroisms... However, I didn’t even think about whether I’d go to the appointment Lucien Lamastre was forcing upon me. A thousand reasons, suggested by my upbringing, by my religious principles still poorly suppressed, and by those prejudices of

morality which always push us to repress our most spontaneous impulses, were fighting my feverish desire to obey.

Lunch ended earlier than usual.

How to use this afternoon? I'd put on a pretty hat I'd made myself, a black felt hat with a big tartan bow; I'd also arranged my black dress so that it had an air of freshness. I first ventured to the Aubins' house, where they were quarrelling. Jeanne was still reproaching her husband for burying himself in Dijon, when an artist could only succeed in Paris; with the curls of her forehead unrolled, her cheeks red, her large bosom too tight in a white blouse, she was getting angry, shouting, stamping her feet. He sat by the window, wordlessly bending under the storm, too unsure of his talent to not be worried by his wife's plotting. They weren't counting on my visit, they didn't conceal it from me, and I left, without anyone insisting on holding me back. I made my way to Father Guérand's house. He hadn't returned yet, and I remained alone in the study for several minutes, my forehead against the turret window, in a state of uncertainty. Finally, he arrived.

"Lucien Lamastre won't be in today," he said, after asking about me. "He's not free."

I was silent... he nodded; there was a moment's silence; then he asked me about the store, about the old ladies, about my parents.

"My child," he said suddenly, "we must speak frankly. If I inadvertently hurt you, you won't hold a grudge against me. Do you promise?"

"Why, yes."

"I have forbidden Lucien Lamastre to my house... We had a violent scene last Wednesday..." He was walking as usual; my oppressed heart was beating slowly; he stopped very close to me, his hands buried in the pockets of his cassock.

"It was about you," he said.

"About me!" I cried.

Did he understand what my cry betrayed about myself? He turned away, and started walking again, but with a thoughtful step under which the parquet groaned, his head bowed, stubbornly staring at the buckles of his shoes.

"Yes... about you... I've been watching Lucien for several weeks... One Sunday evening, as you were leaving me, I saw him approaching you at the corner of the square and the street. That's all I saw, but it was enough. He came by chance on Wednesday. I

asked him about it... he didn't lie to me... he told me he loved you... I asked him if he'd told you... He hadn't... But he told me he would tell you. I ordered him to be quiet... Then I spoke softly to him... I told him everything a priest said in such circumstances... the trouble he would throw into a young girl's soul... the evil deed he would commit... I even, and I beg your forgiveness, assumed that you would love him one day, and showed him what responsibility he was incurring... None of my words touched him. He became irritated, and in turn said everything that a man possessed by love would say in such circumstances. Finally, he left... he's not coming back... He has a bad nature."

Ah! What Father Guérand called a bad nature, how beautiful, strong, and generous he seemed to me at that moment! Lucien loved me, and he confessed it with clear boldness. A delicious joy penetrated me along with a languid desire to weep.

"And you, Mademoiselle Claire, do you love him?" said Father Guérand gruffly.

"Yes," I said simply.

"It's just as I'd feared. And did you know he loved you?"

"I've known since this morning."

"Did he write to you?"

"Yes."

"And what did he tell you?"

"He wants me to meet him this evening in the park."

"You're not going?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know!"

He looked at me stunned. And I looked at him too, but without fear or shame, because nothing seemed more natural than for me to confess my love. He made a discouraged gesture and sat down opposite me.

"Come, my child, you mustn't waver. You cannot go. Listen to me, this isn't just an old priest talking to you. I've known you since you were a little girl. I'm your oldest friend, I'm your Father, I'm in charge of your soul. I must speak to you as I do. Let me tell you what I think. I know Lucien Lamastre well: the feeling he has for you is fierce, but ephemeral. You're preparing yourself for suffering... And if legitimate love, consecrated by the Church, is the noblest of human passions, what is illegitimate love, which marriage does not sanctify? Is that the kind of love you're after?"

“Oh, no!” I cried.

“So, what are you hoping for?”

“That he’ll marry me, because he loves me!”

“My poor child, my poor child! You believe in the first man your youth attracts. But your love is only imagination. Lucien has noticed you: you’re young, pretty, and intelligent. You’ve been flattered by his thoughtfulness, and that’s your love. You’re not going to this appointment. You’re risking your whole life. It’s my duty to stop you and I won’t fail. How guilty I am already for having kept my eyes closed for so long!”

I pitied Father Guérand for indulging in this doubt, which was as unfair to Lucien as it was to me. An anger was growing inside me.

“Listen to me,” he continued. “I’ll see Lucien again, I’ll question him... If he really wants to marry you, he’ll tell his mother and talk to your parents. But you can’t agree to a rendezvous that immediately debases your love and reduces it to the usual adventures in workshops and stores. Come now, Mademoiselle Claire, you’re not just another employee... You belong to a family of honest peasants, you’ve been brought up in the principles of the holy religion, you’re educated, you have refined tastes, pride. You can’t do what the lost workers of the city do.”

“I love Lucien Lamastre with all my soul,” I said.

He wrung his hands.

“I don’t know what to tell you. Answer me frankly, Mademoiselle Claire. Will you go to the park?”

I said nothing. He thought I was simply withholding an answer he hated.

“But he doesn’t love you!” he exclaimed.

“He loves me.”

It was too much. That Father Guérand tried to persuade me that I didn’t love Lucien... I could bear that. However, it was impossible for me to endure his denial of Lucien’s love. In an instant, all my respectful affection vanished. He became the bitter enemy of my happiness.

“My child, I beg you, calm down... you know how much I love you... You’re so young, so innocent! I’m old already and I know how men think, I know Lucien...”

Father Guérand stood before me, hands clasped, a little bent, his face extremely pale, his eyes fixed with plaintive sadness. What did he see in my face? He suddenly straightened up, stretched out his

arms and shouted:

"I forbid you to see him!"

I stood up, trembling with anger. This defence outraged me, all my pride was in revolt, my will, hesitant a minute earlier, had made up its mind irrevocably. Father Guérand followed me in dismay as I descended the stairs:

"Mademoiselle Claire..."

I turned around:

"Promise me you won't go," he said, leaning over with his hand on the railing.

I shook my head with a small, haughty movement.

"I'm going."

And I pushed open the door to the street. I still had half an hour. The streetcar dropped me off at Place Saint-Pierre, and from there I walked up Avenue du Parc.

In the grey sky, two or three very thin blue lines stretched out; a bitter winter wind was blowing. A few people were walking back to the city and the park was now deserted. The dead leaves were rotting; large mossy patches clung to the trunks of the lime trees, which were entwined by ivy, and the black branches were already bearing tiny buds. I went down to the river that borders the park; green, clear and silent, it meanders past a sleeping manor house on the other bank, La Colombière, then flows between low banks, from which a few poplars soar, before losing itself in the meadows. The calm was profound; the very noises that sometimes disturbed it—a hoarse railway whistle, a birdcall—only made it more profound, more sensitive. In a meadow cut by streams, birch trees lined up at regular intervals, and the first mist of evening veiled the vine-covered hills on the horizon. I couldn't see Lucien, but he could see me, hidden a few yards behind me by the fir trees that cast their sad shadows on either side of the long pathway. I thought he wouldn't come; I also felt a keen sense of annoyance at my haste, and yet I wouldn't have given up waiting for him for anything in the world. Suddenly, the sand crunched; I recognised his footstep and forced myself to stand still. In the clear river bottom, lithe grass swayed.

"Mademoiselle Claire," he said.

Then I turned around; and simply, like him, I said:

"Monsieur Lucien."

"I didn't expect," he said, "that you'd make up your mind... I didn't expect it, oh, not at all... I saw you coming... I was there

behind the trees."

His voice was annoyed, almost irritated, as if he were reproaching me. No doubt his birth, his education, his very life, past and present, allowed him to speak to me like that, but I was astonished, and I said to him gently:

"But I'm here... you speak to me as if you regret my presence..."

"Why have you come?" he asked me with authority.

"I received your letter..."

"This could upset you, wound you... I dreaded it. You gave me no authority to write to you like this, to ask for a meeting. You don't know what a young lady can be exposed to... We could be seen... Have you thought about all this?"

"No. I didn't think I was doing anything wrong."

"So, why did you come?"

"And you, why did you write to me?"

"I love you."

He had said this with a sudden gesture, and this gesture, which revealed such a powerful soul, moved me even more perhaps than the words themselves. He loved me more than I expected, with a need and a command for me to love him too. For the first time, a man was saying to me, *I love you.* I'd always imagined he'd say it differently, with tenderness, with fear, but Lucien said it in a way so contrary to my dream that it wasn't the confession that upset me, but the way it was expressed.

"The first day I saw you, I understood you straight away. The job you're doing isn't right for you. Father Guérand told me about your life, your childhood, your misfortunes... I began feeling sorry for you. One day he said nothing more; he could tell I loved you... And I loved you not just for your beauty, but for your intelligence... and pride. Yes, I love you, I love you, I'm not afraid to tell you... And why should I hide such a sincere feeling? Father Guérand accuses me of doing evil... I do no harm, because I love you."

He added with a sort of feverishness:

"Ah, yes, I love you..."

Then, without questioning me, looking at me fixedly, as if he read my heart, and with a confidence in which he did not even mingle with vanity:

"And you love me too," he said.

"Yes."

"For a long time now."

“Like you, from the first moment.”

We’d left the riverside and were going through the park under the trees. I walked without seeing anything, I would have followed him to the end of the world. Sometimes we touched. I seemed to be dreaming... He loved me, he loved me... How could he love me! All my pride vanished; so proud of myself only yesterday, I now felt only the humility of my condition, the humility of my intelligence, the humility of my knowledge. What was I next to him? He belonged to one of Dijon’s oldest families, he’d studied and learned much, he’d lived at last... And he loved me, me who knew nothing and lived nothing! So many other women could have loved him... He could love so many more! And it was me, it was me! How handsome, how strong, how good I thought he was! After a few moments, he stopped at a traffic circle where old stone benches leaned against the trees. An uncertain shadow floated across the solitary park.

“You know,” he said, “all the dreadful things they say about me... And they’re not wrong... My parents raised me too strictly... Free at twenty-one, I’ve never denied myself any pleasure. But what can you learn from books when there’s life? I’ve lived... For weak souls, it’s a crime to live. I’ve been harshly reproached for it. In the end, I burned through almost everything I owned, and returned to Dijon, my heart weary, my body tired... I intended to live there in peace, forgotten by everyone and myself... And then I met you... and it was as if I’d never met a woman.”

I’d sat down; Lucien’s every word swelled my heart to bursting, and sometimes I’d close my eyes as if I were fainting.

“Yes,” he continued, “I’ve rediscovered a youth I thought I’d lost. I’ll always regret having looked so far for a happiness so close to me. I love for the first time... for the first time... And I love you for all that is young, innocent, and pure in you.”

“Will you always love,” I said, “what attracted you for a moment?”

“I forbid you to doubt me. I love you with all my soul, and for all my life...”

Even today, when I have only the memory, how sweetly this violence penetrates me! What happiness invaded me! At that hour, really, only the two of us existed on earth; and the earth, its trees, its flowers, all its grace and all its richness blossomed only for us. I loved Lucien as a strong-willed, tyrannical... Shy, pleading, I would

never have loved him. But he asserted his love, he imposed it on me; he also asserted that I loved him; and without struggling, I gave in to this pride that was more powerful than mine. What happened next, I'm not sure... He spoke... I listened... the shadow was less indecisive... For a while he remained standing... then he sat down on the bench... our hands joined... mine were icy, and his were warm... How small my trusting hands became in his! All was silent... A guard was walking through the park... He didn't know me, but he knew Lucien, and he winked at him in greeting, which revolted me. But Lucien was already dragging me away. We parted at the gate...

That evening, at dinner, M. Coulandot, who was watching me, suddenly said:

"Mademoiselle Claire, you look as if you've been made very happy."

I blushed and stammered. Yes, the greatest happiness of all had happened to me: the man I loved loved me. This happiness transformed my whole life. The most splendid palace was no match for the store; all my dreams decorated my poor room; I felt tenderness for Mademoiselle Mélanie and Mademoiselle Berthe. For the first time, the sweetness of spring moved me, because my heart was awakening. How many times did I repeat while folding coupons or at night in bed: *He loves me, he loves me!*

Mademoiselle Berthe often blamed me for my carelessness and distraction:

"Let's see, Mademoiselle Claire, why don't you take care of the customers?"

At night, I'd leave the candle burning and think about him. Then, through the door, Mademoiselle Mélanie would shout to me:

"It's after eleven! Snuff it out!"

And these continual observations, which once would have irritated me so much, delighted me, because they marked the obsession of my love.

I saw Lucien again the following Sunday, at the same time, in the park. He told me he couldn't imagine life without me, and that he would marry me. Then, more than ever, my ignorance appalled me. I made every effort to learn; I wanted to improve myself to be worthy of him. The old ladies, hostile to my first advances, only spoke to me about the necessities of the store, and the rest of the time pretended to ignore my existence. But what did I care!

Wouldn't I soon escape from this prison and live with him forever?

Months went by. We rarely saw each other; it was already summer, with its long days; the propitious shade of the last winter evenings no longer protected us. We only met cautiously; in Dijon, scandal would have been swift. He wrote to me once or twice a week, so as not to arouse attention; he went down Rue de la Liberté every day at midday, when the other employees were having lunch and I could be at the window without dreading Mademoiselle Berthe's surveillance. What a feverish wait for that moment! But Lucien was showing an impatience that didn't quite bother me. We had never kissed; he often caressed my hands and kissed them, but that was all. Once, however, he wanted to kiss me on the lips. It was a few kilometres from Corcelles, on a little sunken lane lined with stunted trees, winding around the foot of a steep hill crowned by a fort. It was the first day of May; it had rained in the morning, and basking in the sun the wet earth exhaled a pungent odour. We strolled along, his arm around my waist. The sun went down; sweetness was everywhere, in the air, in the trees, in the grass; suddenly he drew me to him and lowered his head... All my numb reason suddenly revived... I jumped out of his grasp. He didn't try to grab me, but he did snap the umbel of a white yarrow with a sharp blow from his cane.

"You pretend you love me," he said wryly.

He never even alluded to this incident; he pretended, as he walked by my side, not to touch me and to behave with me like a brother with a sister he wouldn't love very ardently. These were my first sufferings of love, not that I doubted him, but I guessed intentions in him that my innocence judged contemptible, and I was disappointed not to be close with him anymore. Our marriage was out of the question, but I couldn't imagine for a second that he could lie regarding his oaths of love. Towards the end of July, I didn't see him for ten days. Distraught, I managed to control myself. Several times, after dinner, I used the excuse of an urgent need to run an errand in town, and I prowled around his house. There was no light in his room, only a dim glow from the window of his mother's bedroom. After ten or fifteen minutes, I'd come home even more overwhelmed. Finally, one Saturday, I received a letter: in a few words, he had arranged to meet me the next morning at the Chartreuse de Champmol.

The Chartreuse de Champmol lies behind the railway station, on

the Route de Plombières, at the end of a rather sad neighbourhood... workers' houses, a cavalry barracks, a washhouse. All that remains of the Chartreuse are a few stones, and on the very spot where it once stood, an insane asylum has been built. In the garden, which slopes down to a small river, a ruined tower is a reminder of what Philippe le Hardi's most famous artists had built. It's a very quiet place, visited only by foreigners passing through Dijon. A few peaceful fools, dressed in blue linen, bask in the sun. Behind the chapel, in a narrow space enclosed by stone walls, the Well of Moses can be found. A hexagonal pillar rises out of the water; each face, sheltered by the wings of an angel, bears a carved statue of a prophet. A calvary once stood above it. M. Coulandot had taken me there one Sunday and, with the help of a book, had explained to me at length the influence of this work on the French Renaissance, and the attributes of the prophets, and the words engraved on the scrolls they hold in their hands.

Lucien was standing at the entrance, and I could tell from his expression that something serious was brewing in his heart.

"Why did you leave me without any news?" I asked.

"I did it quite deliberately."

"I've suffered horribly..."

"All the better," he replied.

We entered together. The concierge's granddaughter, a girl of about twelve, hurried past us with a large key in her hand. She walked ahead of us, listing all the old stones in her sour voice. The big bell of Saint-Bénigne tolled the end of High Mass. It was a warm summer morning, with a blue sky and fragrant air. A few fools were sweeping the pathways. In front of the well, the girl went to use her key to unlock the grate fixed to the well coping, prattling the whole time, but Lucien sent her away.

"You asked me," he said, "why I'd left you without news for so long, and I said I was glad you'd suffered. It's true: one only suffers if one truly loves. So, you suffered?"

"Yes."

"And what did you believe?... Did you think I didn't love you anymore?"

"No."

"Well, it's possible..."

"If you stopped loving me so quickly, you'd never have loved me in the first place."

“And if it were you who, by your conduct...”

“My conduct!”

“You have a way of loving that gives away nothing of yourself.”

He looked at me with cold anger as I let out an indignant cry. He leaned towards me slightly and said slowly:

“You love cautiously.”

“But... Lucien,” I stammered, “since I’m to be your wife...”

He merely shrugged.

“My wife! I can’t marry you.”

“W-what? Why?”

“My family has old ideas, prejudices; it’s a provincial family, bourgeois to excess, steeped in devotion and imbecilically vain. I’ve had violent discussions with my mother about you. I confessed everything to her; I showed her who you were, and what you were worth...”

I could now guess what he was going to say, but I wanted to hear it from him. His voice was short, dry, yet hesitant. We walked slowly around the well.

“My youth,” he continued, “remains for my mother a persistent cause of sadness and shame. Yet I’ve done nothing serious... all the things that rich young people do when they’re brought up too strictly... If I were to tell her tonight that I’m marrying a young girl...”

He was looking for a word that wouldn’t offend me; I felt sorry for him:

“Yes,” I said, “a store girl.”

He lowered his eyes. I smiled at him, though tears were pressing at the edges of my eyes...

“Well, what would she do?” I added, as he was silent still.

He almost replied, but I answered for him.

“She’d never admit it, would she, that you’d marry a girl from such a humble background.”

He bowed his head. The opposition of his family seemed to me the most natural thing in the world, and my mad imagination had never supposed that it would fall on its own; I foresaw it, but without fear, certain that I could rely on our most faithful love to overcome it. As Lucien’s mother was very old, I also sometimes thought that an imminent death would relieve us of all the misery of such a battle. What did the years matter to me? Eager for the happiness I would owe to a free existence united to his, I

nevertheless loved him with too much chastity not to accept a long engagement. All I needed to enchant my present life was the conviction that he loved me; I demanded no more. I was young, and I believed that men's hearts are like women's hearts. And now he was backing down, giving up the fight, evading it; more than that, he didn't love me the way I loved him, and maybe he didn't love me with love. I put my hand on his arm:

"That's not so bad," I said mockingly.

He had no idea of my sadness.

"You don't know my mother! The simple desire to marry you surpasses all the past actions for which she reproaches me. She wouldn't forgive me for inflicting this pain on her, after so many others. I have no right to be cruel to her, even if she's wrong. She's old... I'm her son..."

In this small space, we circled the well as if in a cage. The very high walls, masking the horizon, isolated us from life. There was no noise excepting the distant ringing of church bells, carried by the light air where it lingered. We leaned against the masonry enclosure of the well. Behind the black grille, the statues leaned over the dark water. Lucien was getting frustrated, tearing off small pieces of plaster and tossing them into that deep, dark abyss.

"Why are you worried?" I asked. "We'll wait."

"You don't love me!"

"I don't love you?!"

"No, you don't love me... When you love, you don't wait. But you would wait for years. Our happiness is almost impossible, at least complete happiness. I show you all the obstacles, I reveal the future. You answer me calmly and unemotionally—*we'll wait*—as if it were tomorrow!... You don't love me, and I was a fool to think you did!... It's just the same: you liked me, I liked you. You were also proud that a man in society fancied you, and you thought it would be a nice marriage."

How did I not collapse at that moment? Was he sincere? Was he lying? I only hoped his grief was leading him astray.

"It's precisely because I love you," I said, "that I'll have the courage to wait..."

"Wait for what? For my mother to die! When will she die and how can you wish for her death? Those who love don't wait. You speak like a child because the future seems limitless to you. Where will we be tomorrow? We love each other as we love at fifteen."

“Well,” I said, “what do you want?” He clasped my hands.

“Do you love me, Claire?”

I answered gravely:

“I love you, Lucien.”

“Then you must be my mistress.”

“Your mistress!”

His mistress... his mistress! He wanted me to become his mistress! Indeed, a society man doesn’t marry a peasant’s daughter, a store girl at M. Coulandot’s. He makes her his mistress! His love is a gift. What was my dream? I dreamed of uniting my life with his, and he attempted merely to seduce me! I dreamed of marrying him, and he offered me shame...

“Why, yes,” he continued, with ever-increasing passion. “My mistress, my mistress! I love you. I adore you. You will be my mistress. You will be my mistress!”

“Stop!” I shouted. “Never, never!”

He grabbed me. His right arm curved around my waist, his left hand held the back of my neck; he drew me against him; and although I was overwhelmed in spite all my strength, I saw his shining eyes inclined towards mine and felt his breath on my mouth. We struggled on, without a word, without a cry, without a complaint. The silence was absolute. My strength deserted me, however, for despite my terror, I didn’t stop loving him for a minute. He frightened me, he drove me to despair, I hated him for the baseness of his feelings and because he was destroying my most cherished illusion; but I loved as much as ever his face so close to mine, his hands that imprisoned me, his willing body. I was afraid of myself—would I suffer the shame of being his mistress, and if I did, what misery the future held in store for me! I stiffened. He dominated me; a smile flitted across his lips. Then, as if he were hurting me, I shrieked; he let go of me in fright. I stepped back: he was leaning against the wall of the well, stunned and furious, realising that for a false cry he’d let slip a woman he’d never take back again. Indeed, now that I was free of the turmoil I’d felt against him, he appeared to me in all the horror of desire. His mistress, his mistress! He wanted me to become his mistress, and he was trying to force me into it! All the brutality of love, all the wretchedness it conceals, all the hypocrisy of clever phrases and eternal oaths, all its tyrannical cowardice, all this suddenly emerged. In a few minutes, I’d learned more about love than in the

long months my heart had been beating with tenderness.

"Claire!" he exclaimed.

He made a movement, then restrained himself as the concierge's girl came running back. Then we set off; Lucien was behind me, quite a distance away. At the Chartreuse gate, he joined me, but as we crossed the threshold, I turned back and went in alone.

IX

MY inexperience, pride, and enslavement to prejudice had fixed this mutiny that could have led me to use a weapon, if I'd had one. I found myself again in my little room, lying on the bed, eyes shut, my body broken, unable to cry and gasping for breath, seeing only Lucien's burning eyes. The next day, he wrote to me. He was still begging me to be his mistress since I couldn't become his wife. It would have been hard to forgive him for hoping to win me back with false promises; his frankness was somehow endearing, but I didn't reply. He wrote me five or six more letters. I remained stubbornly silent, yet I was beginning to approve of him not marrying me. I was angry at life for putting me in such a humble position, while it put him too far above me. I was angry at life for bringing us closer together only to so cruelly separate us.

Summer wound to an end. In September, M. Coulandot gave me three weeks' leave. As I passed through Vernay on my way to Gernin, the bells were ringing loudly, and peasants were going up to the little church with bouquets. Mademoiselle Alquier was getting married; she was marrying M. de Lure, a wealthy landowner from the east of France, for love, and the village celebrated her like a queen. How I wept as I listened to those bells! One day, in Gernin, as she was with her husband in a little English cart, she stopped the carriage and chatted with me for a few moments. I never tired of contemplating her beauty, but I wasn't jealous of her happiness. She guessed that I was suffering, and without questioning me, she gave me a little courage. Back in Dijon, I learned that Lucien was leaving for a very long time. Ah! I never loved him so much as the day I tore myself away from him... I'd never see him again, I wouldn't even see him in the street among a crowd of indifferent people; he wouldn't even live in the town I used to live in; he'd be far, far away, I'd never know where! I wanted to run to him: I was mad; I would have thrown myself into his arms. Customers crowded the store until evening, so I had to stay. I wrote to him, begging for an appointment, but never got a reply. Later, I told a friend this poor story. This friend considered it a great misfortune for me to have

loved this violent, selfish, dissolute man. Ah, what did I care about the faults, the vices even, that could be found in him, and what did I care about his betrayal! He loved me, for a few days perhaps but he loved me. I loved him. I love him still. The heart doesn't care what it loves; however contemptible its object, it clings to it madly. Now that I know better the brevity of life and how rarely the heart is passionate, I no longer resent its brutality.

Life went on, regular and monotonous. It was October with its cooler winds, then winter with its icy rains. Every morning at seven o'clock, Mademoiselle Mélanie opened her bedroom door, and Mademoiselle Berthe, who had a cold, coughed interminably. I was the second to arrive at the store, as Mademoiselle Berthe was slow to get dressed. The cashier, already seated at his desk, would raise his head, then lower it with a quick nod to greet me. The young clerks were outside arranging the display; the sidewalk arabesques traced by the street sweeper's nozzle were still wet; Mademoiselle Berthe joined me, and we exchanged a few insignificant words. I waited for the customers. Around ten o'clock, M. Coulandot would appear, and on market days, when farmers and landowners from the surrounding area gathered in town, he'd stand right in the middle of us. Noon sounded. Mademoiselle Berthe was eating with M. Coulandot, his wife, and the cashier. I was alone in this vast room on the second floor, where the heavy smell of piled-up clothes hung in the air. In the street, the employees of the other stores, men, women and girls, spilled out. I knew almost all of them, I knew which women the men were looking for, and which teenagers the apprentices were following. I imagined the little sentimental adventures that embellished their existence, and I envied them. I often evoked Lucien's face in this crowd. Mademoiselle Berthe would return, and I'd have lunch with Mademoiselle Mélanie. She would talk about the morning's customers, tell us about their purchases, and then we'd go back down to the store. I went about my work like an automaton. What could the future hold for me? A great light had dazzled me; suddenly it vanished, and a thick shadow enveloped me. And so, until old age, if I could manage it, I would do the same things at the same hours, among the same people. I was living, while a man was thinking of me! Now I felt like dying!

I gazed at Mademoiselle Mélanie in disgust. One day I'd have that wrinkled, hollow face, that withered body, those white lips,

those dead eyes, those mechanical gestures, that fearful little laugh. And I was young, full of strength, eager for freedom... Lucien had filled my life; he still did, but like the painful memory of a dream. I remembered the past. I composed the future to my whim... Soon I found Lucien again; I was independent... he was marrying me... Am I sure he was marrying me? Then I fell back into my distress. The most beautiful dream is exhausted, the deepest memory falls asleep. How useless was my miserable life! If it had allowed me to help my parents, I would have accepted it without complaint... But I was earning nine hundred francs a year. Months went by. Old women pushed their little carriages loaded with violets down the street. Cottony buds burst from the branches of the trees that adorned the squares. A torpor numbed me... If I stayed any longer, I'd never be able to leave. Sometimes I caught myself repeating aloud:

"I need to leave... I need to leave!"

Since my break with Father Guérand, I'd been seeing more of the Aubins. Madame Aubin didn't appeal to me; her unkempt dress, her manner and her words, her excessive self-confidence, all prevented me from liking her. But she amused me. Shy, kind and weak, the husband trembled before her. The size of his wife, her corpulence, the brightness of her voice, the vivacity of her gestures, the crudity of her words, everything about her amazed and terrified him: he could never resist her. An artist, moreover, a true artist, fine, delicate, in love with his art, indifferent to honors, without ambition, happy only in his studio, with his wax, his plaster and his tools. Madame Aubin had, I don't know how, sensed my feelings for Lucien; perhaps she had met us one day. She joked with me once or twice about it; I should have been angry, but I confided in her because she was there and because I didn't know anyone else. She mocked my naïveté, my tenderness, my too-faithful memory. Ah, that's not the way to deal with men; you must subdue them. She used the words of a tamer.

"You're a great beast, Claire. Ask my husband how I deal with him. He doesn't move, does he, Albert? He does what I want."

Albert, a large white smock on his back, a trimmer in his soiled hands, smiled, then waved at me:

"She's astonishing," he said, admiringly. And he was right: common, vulgar, she spoke of my secret in the most bruising way, and yet she didn't hurt me. I laughed out loud at her mirth and her way of treating sentimental things with such heavy contempt and

almost regretted not being like her. Thus, was born between us, and in spite of myself, an intimacy that I deplored once we were out of her house.

Madame Aubin had no wish to confine herself to Dijon: “It was,” she said, “for an artist, a future without horizons.” She wanted to live in the capital; only there would her husband’s talent be appreciated. Her husband still put up some resistance to this desire. He loved Dijon; he foresaw that in Paris he would often sacrifice his artist’s conscience to the need to get by, and the struggles he would have to wage frightened the softness of his character. Madame Aubin abused him so roughly that he submitted. They would leave Dijon as soon as a deputy of Parliament, their patron, had secured a position for Albert in Paris. This resolution increased my sadness. What would become of me after their departure? My solitude would be absolute. Madame Aubin urged me to go with them, certain that my embroidery would be much appreciated in the department stores. But I didn’t trust her fine words. What did she know about a city where she’d never been more than a tourist? M. Aubin addressed me.

“I give in to my wife,” he said, “because I am her husband. But you, a distant cousin... Why obey her?”

But the idea was still with me. Deep in my heart was the hope of creating an independent situation for myself. Lucien was perhaps in Paris... love stifled the last fears of my reason. At the end of April, as I entered the Aubins’ house, I found the apartment in turmoil, the carpets untucked, the trunks in the anteroom. Albert quietly nailed boxes together, while Madame Aubin emptied cupboards, closets, and chests of drawers.

“Albert!” she shouted. “Albert has been appointed professor at the École des Arts Décoratifs.[3] We leave Thursday.”

Albert, more sadly, repeated:

“We leave on Thursday.”

“Well!” she cried again. “Are you coming this time? A friend of ours has rented us a little pavilion in Malakoff. We’ll work together. And when your business takes off, you’ll settle down on your own.”

Albert, at the door of the workshop, was shaking his head, advising me to refuse. I accepted. Madame Aubin threw herself around my neck, swore eternal friendship to me, then asked me to advance her a small sum of money; her husband’s salary was due next month; besides, she would return it to me in Paris. It was half

my savings, and I gave it to her the next day.

They left. Madame Aubin overwhelmed me with letters, and every day I put off informing M. Coulandot. Finally, one afternoon, I knocked on the small office door.

"What do you want, then?" he said a little impatiently, as I had interrupted his correspondence.

"Nothing," I said, intimidated. "You're busy. I'll leave."

"But no, no! What do you want?"

"I'm leaving the store, Monsieur Coulandot."

"You want to leave us! You want to leave the store! What is this all about?"

He closed the half-open door with his foot:

"Explain yourself..."

"I'm going to Paris. If I stay here, I'll die of boredom. What can I hope for here? The fate of Mademoiselle Mélanie and Mademoiselle Berthe? The Aubins left Dijon two weeks ago. It's been agreed that I'm to join them and move in with them. I've told my parents."

"And what will you do, please, in Paris?"

"I will work..."

"And do what?"

"I'll do embroidery. You yourself praise my designs. I'll do embroidery for scarves, blouses and coats. In fact, the Aubins..."

He shrugged:

"Ah, the Aubins... the Aubins! These are people I do not like. They are the ones who drag you down. The man's a fool. And as for his wife... Ah! She's not offering you hospitality out of pure affection... There's something going on there... You don't suspect a thing... Oh, no, you're always so confident, aren't you? If you went to visit relatives or other friends, I wouldn't worry so much. You're not cut out for life here, in the store. Within four walls, selling silks. You're not like everyone else. You need freedom, independence. You need to live, as you say..."

Nothing could have changed my mind. M. Coulandot's shawl had slipped. He put it back on his shoulders and with his arms on the table, he continued:

"And what about embroidery? Do you think that'll do the trick on its own? There are a lot of talented embroiderers in Paris. Who will you sell your designs to? You have no connections. The Aubins won't be much use to you. Besides, you'll be paid very, very poorly. It's not easy to build up a clientele. You're not thinking things

through. The Aubins are getting to you. You really don't seem to have any regard for me."

"Ah, Monsieur Coulandot, you mustn't think that!"

"I love you very much, Mademoiselle Claire, and I didn't imagine your future to be so bleak. You would have married. Monsieur Henry has very deep feelings for you, you know. I could increase your salary. You could live somewhere else... at last you'd be free. That's your dearest wish, isn't it?"

I couldn't help smiling sadly.

"I never suspected that Monsieur Henry was thinking about me," I said. "I never think about him. Besides, I want a completely free life. I don't want to be an employee anymore. No, nothing you say will convince me. Only, please believe in my gratitude, my affection..."

He rang the bell. An apprentice ran up and gave him some letters. I didn't move. He affected to look for something on his desk, then turned around:

"That's fine, let's not talk about it anymore," he said curtly. "When do you want to leave?"

"Saturday."

"It will be the second. I'll pay you for the whole month. You don't have anything else to tell me, do you?"

"I wouldn't want anyone in the store to know in advance that I was leaving... They would question me, they would..."

"It's understood."

I opened the door. As I walked away, he spoke quietly:

"Pride will be your undoing, Mademoiselle Claire."

The following Saturday, I left. M. Coulandot had kept his promise, and our conversation went unheard. Kneeling in front of a trunk, I was folding the few things that belonged to me when Mademoiselle Berthe entered.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "To Gernin, to your parents' house?"

"No," I said indifferently. "To Paris."

"To Paris!" she cried. "And for how long?"

"Forever."

She raised her arms to the ceiling, called out to Mademoiselle Mélanie, and both gazed at me, eager to question me, yet not daring.

"You must tell us..." said Mademoiselle Berthe. "Why are you

going to Paris?"

I lowered the lid of the trunk and closed the lock.

"I've been offered a very attractive position as an embroiderer."

In a moment I'd taken revenge for all their nastiness. They'd probably never forgive me for having so cleverly thwarted their vigilant curiosity. I accompanied them to the dining room. I had very little time left as I was catching the first train. Soon the hotel omnibus pulled up to the curb. Madame Coulandot embraced me, and I shook M. Henry's hand, which trembled in mine. I embraced my two old enemies. The sky was blue, the air infinitely soft, a delicious May morning. The coachman's whip cracked. Kids were gathering.

"Good luck, Mademoiselle Claire!" said M. Coulandot, standing on the footboard.

"Do you still have affection for me, Monsieur Coulandot?" I asked.

"But of course, always so much," he said. The car began to move.

Ah! How light I was! Light, yes, I can't think of a word that better expresses this joyful fever. I was leaving, I was leaving! I was alone, free. I was hurtling towards the unknown, a charming unknown. With such childish gaiety I paid for my ticket and checked my trunk! Suddenly, I caught sight of Father Guérand leaning against the quay wall, reading a newspaper. A crewman, clearing a cart, forced me to move against him.

"Mademoiselle Claire!" he said.

I stopped. He held out his hand.

"Where are you going?" he said, as if we'd just parted.

"To Paris."

He looked at me in astonishment.

"Monsieur Coulandot sent you to Paris?"

"Oh, no! I'm no longer with Monsieur Coulandot. I'm going to seek my fortune on my own." I insisted on these last words, for I guessed the question he was avoiding asking me... Yet he must have known the details of my break-up with Lucien... He must have seen him again... questioned him...

"And what will you do in Paris?" he asked.

"Embroidery. I'd like to have workers. I'd draw... they'd embroider... In the meantime, I'll stay with the Aubins... They, too, are in Paris."

The omnibus driver made a final call to the travellers.

“What class are you travelling in?”

I showed him my second-class ticket.

“You’ll get there in third-class just as quickly,” he said, “and it’s cheaper.”

Then he looked for a ladies’ compartment. The locomotive whistled…

“Come on, cheer up, my child…”

He drew me against him, kissed my forehead, and I kissed him on both cheeks, which were unshaven and stinging.

“Ah!” he said, laughing to hide his tenderness. “You can well embrace an old priest like me.”

He helped me into the car, closed the door and stood up on tiptoe:

“Mademoiselle Claire,” he said, “if you’re having trouble, don’t forget that in Dijon there’s an old Father who will never stop loving you…”

X

THE Aubins lived in the Paris suburb of Malakoff, several kilometres from the city proper.

"You'll see," said Albert, who was waiting for me at the station. "The countryside is lovely."

The trunk was loaded onto an open carriage; but the coachman, hearing such a distant address, refused to go. Poor M. Aubin summoned up all his courage and demanded obedience; all he got in reply was a shower of insults. A town sergeant came forward, and several travellers gathered around; standing on the seat, the coachman pointed to the trunk, then to an uncertain point in space:

"Malakoff!" he shouted with a contemptuous exclamation.

The crowd laughed.

"They're provincials," said a nearby kid.

We were being ridiculed. At last, a grumpy old coachman, his moustache soaked with tobacco juice, stooped, pulled up against the sidewalk. He was driving a rain-washed, sun-scorched gallery wagon, swaying on squeaky springs and pulled by two skinny little horses whose long, dust-bleached tails almost touched the pavement. M. Aubin made a decisive gesture and called the coachman, who grunted his consent to drive us. The laughter increased. The coach set off slowly, swaying left and right, back and forth; the coachman lowered his head, the little horses lowered theirs; on the roof, the trunk repeated all the movements of the carriage. I was ashamed of myself, squeezed into the corner, as if passers-by were going to chase and harass us. Finally, around four o'clock, we crossed the perimeter wall.

"And we're here," said M. Aubin.

We rode down a poorly paved street, lined with dried-out gardens, boarded-up shacks, and wretched taverns. At times, it was a wasteland strewn with rags, scraps of paper, and unrecognizable filth. Then there were the sullen, irregular houses, leaning like cripples against each other. From time to time, a man would cross the road. Suddenly, the carriage rounded a bend in a street fully exposed to the sun. Kids of all ages crowded it, playing and arguing.

Mothers sat against the walls, mending clothes and chatting. The carriage aroused a great deal of curiosity, and the children ran around the horses, poking fun at the driver. At the end of the street, a field stretched out, filled with garbage and cut by a narrow path; three or four trellised arbors had been built, with grapevine climbing up them.

"Isn't the countryside lovely?" said M. Aubin.

I didn't have time to reply; the carriage stopped in front of a red-tinted entrance. He jumped out; the door opened, and Madame Aubin rushed towards us. She resembled the women who worked in the street and was perhaps even more unkempt. Her hair, loosely combed back, was scattered over her forehead and cheeks; her bosom, unrestrained by a corset, fell into a white blouse where stains were accumulating; she was tying a blue apron over her petticoat and her feet were dragging in slippers. She kissed me madly. We entered the house. It was a small, dark pavilion at the end of a courtyard: on the first floor, a dining room and kitchen; on the second floor, three bedrooms, one of which was reserved for me. M. Aubin, assisted by the coachman, carried the trunk up the spiral staircase.

"How nice it is here!" he said when he'd pushed it into a corner. "Air, a single house, trees, greenery. It's like a dream!"

All I could see from the window was a shed with two bay windows cut into the roof.

"This is my studio," he said.

"And the trees," I said, "where are they?"

"I showed them to you earlier, at the end of the street."

"Ah! Come now," exclaimed Madame Aubin, shrugging her shoulders. "Albert was like you at first... He looked for trees and greenery. He thought the country was awful. I had to get angry. Today, for example, he's delighted."

Unpacking took only a few hours. I immediately thought of working on the design with M. Aubin, embroidering a few samples and running to the stores to offer them; my eagerness was matched by my inexperience. As Madame Aubin, who had been living in Malakoff for a month, was unable to get her house in order, she decided to put me to work. A local carpenter had just nailed up the curtains; the furniture mingled in the rooms with the unpacked trunks and crates. Her husband spent his days in the workshop, and three mornings a week taught a course at the École des Arts

Décoratifs. He ate in the dining room, where plates were piled up on the carpet, and slept in a bedroom where the box spring lay on the floor. In fact, I did all the work, as Madame Aubin's stout build made her tire very quickly. When everything was finished, M. Aubin remembered his promise. But no sooner had we started the first lesson than his wife entered the workshop:

"Let's see, Albert, what about your medals? You can take care of Claire when they're ready. She has time."

Each lesson brought back the same scene. M. Aubin would docilely pick up his chisel again. I offered to pay him, so that he wouldn't waste the hours he spent with me. He refused... but his wife accepted. From then on, we could work together in peace and quiet. This shy little man, who didn't dare support an opinion contrary to his wife's, was an excellent teacher. Everything he said was clear, intelligent and precise. He had little thought of honors, and his wife reproached him harshly for this. Had he left Dijon only to shut himself away within four walls? Shouldn't he be performing his art in the open, attracting patrons? Who would suspect his existence if he weren't seen? Certainly not "them." The enigmatic "them" represented those with power—Beaux-Arts officials, jury members, politicians—who handed out commissions and crosses. Didn't the other artists work to intrigue these patrons? First you attracted a patron, then you worked, with the assurance of a profit. Art for art's sake was all very well, but there was no profit in it. She lamented; then, her coarse nature unleashed, she pummelled her husband with insults. How can artists have such worries? M. Coulandot didn't talk about his wares the way Madame Aubin talked about her husband's work. He listened, his face resigned, nodding his approval of the slightest word. She invoked my opinion, demanded my agreement. Gently, I tried to calm her; she became irritated. She was outraged by my moderate use of language; she esteemed people only by the abundance of their swear words. At the same time, she predicted the most sinister future for me, convinced that I lacked precisely those qualities of intrigue that precipitate success. Also, this strange woman didn't allow me any freedom; if I isolated myself in my room, she forced me to chat with her or help her with the housework. Her insistent discussions with the maid even prevented me from working. As she was a very skillful draughtswoman, I asked her one day to imagine some designs for me to embroider. She burst out laughing and

shrugged her shoulders.

"Have these embroideries been ordered? Will they be paid for? No, they won't, will they? Why don't you leave me alone. I won't draw for nothing."

Autumn spread its first melancholy over the surrounding countryside. These were not the red hues that in October colour the forests of Gernin; the short, burnt grass of the bowers blended with the soil; the little arbors showed under their green-slatted skeletons a few rickety tables covered in the shards of broken bottles; the hedges took on the dark tone of dead wood... Madame Aubin's blunt refusal clarified matters for me. The constant amazement and the sort of bewilderment in which I had lived since my arrival in Malakoff had paralysed my energy and my intelligence. This suburban village was, in truth, at the end of the world, further from Paris than Dijon. Unceasingly detained in the pavilion by domestic chores or struggling in my room to make use of M. Aubin's lessons, I had only rarely been to Paris, and even then, accompanied by Madame Aubin. I rented a room on Rue de la Tour, in a workers' house. At first, this news made Madame Aubin very angry. She accused me of ingratitude; then my sudden revolt, at first surprising her, gradually softened her. Life became more bearable. I worked from morning to night, drawing and embroidering, and ate my meals at her place. When I'd made about twenty embroideries, arrangements of flowers, buttons and leaves for dresses, collars, parasols, candy bags and scarves, I asked M. Coulandot for a few letters of recommendation. He sent me four, one for a store in Faubourg Saint-Honoré near Rue Royale, the other for Chaussée-d'Antin, the third for Boulevard de Clichy, and the fourth for Boulevard Malesherbes. One fine morning, with my most beautiful models packed away in a long cardboard box, I went downstairs. I was full of hope; more than that, I was sure my embroideries would please, and I entered the Faubourg Saint-Honoré store with perfect confidence. Young women were examining lace coupons. A young lady stepped forward:

"What would you like, mademoiselle?"

"To speak to your director."

"You mean the manger, no doubt. Perhaps I could, if you..."

"Yes, yes, that's who I'd like to see."

"Would you like to follow me?"

A tall woman, with a pair of spectacles at the end of her nose,

looked at me with an impertinent air. I held out M. Coulandot's letter. She read it, opened my box, and shuffled my embroideries.

"I'm very sorry, mademoiselle, but we have our suppliers, and what you're selling isn't Parisian enough. It's heavy, it's too provincial..."

I found myself outside, walking without knowing where I was going, repeating only the words I'd heard, sometimes laughing like a lost woman at my confidence so quickly destroyed. What was the point of presenting myself elsewhere? Wouldn't I get the same answer? How sad my room in Malakoff seemed to me that evening! It was raining; in the light of the lamp, I stared at my embroideries spread out on the table. Yes, they were heavy, common, awful; yes, I had nothing that refined people like. I sat down and started to work; I began a garland of buttercups...

When I'd finished that embroidery, I made a few more, then headed back to the stores. My heart was pounding. M. Coulandot, it would seem, was not a very influential man in Paris. At Chaussée-d'Antin, I received the same answer as at Faubourg Saint-Honoré. On Boulevard de Clichy, they wouldn't even open my box. On Boulevard Malesherbes, at a confectioner's, they kept the model of a candy bag and promised to write to me.

Winter thawed into resplendent spring. M. Aubin received an important order from the State; his wife was triumphant. I waited in vain for the promised letter. Nevertheless, I persisted; I sought more elegant designs, more harmonious colours, and I knocked on other doors; hardly anyone looked at what I brought. Tiredness and despair consumed me; I had almost no money left; Madame Aubin, who claimed to have repaid me everything she owed me by feeding me, no longer wanted to give me a place at her table on the same terms. How she mocked me for the futility of my efforts! I left Dijon nearly a year ago. What had I done, other than lose the security of tomorrow for incessant uncertainty, dissipate my savings so painstakingly amassed, and feel more keenly than ever, in the face of a bad life, the pitiful weakness of an overly proud, isolated woman!

I didn't know how much one unconsciously loves the country of one's youth. In my distress, my thoughts returned to it. The miserable countryside of Malakoff conjured up memories of snow-laden woods, and the hustle and bustle of Paris evoked the quiet little streets of Dijon that surround the Visitandine convent. I saw

again the gruff face of M. Coulandot, Father Guérand leaning against the mantelpiece of his study, his hands in the pockets of his cassock, and the old damsels standing at their shelves. The past was calling me back, at a time when I needed all my strength to conquer the future. I didn't have the courage to hear the hail of the Malakoff bell celebrating Easter over the shouts of the children... My heart listened through space to the deep voice of Saint-Bénigne. I left that very morning, Maundy Thursday, without giving the Aubins any notice other than a letter. I could no longer live in this suburban village, close to the Aubins, weary and frightened by the difficulties, without support or backing.

As two o'clock struck, I arrived in Dijon, and found myself standing in the station square, my small suitcase in my hand, the collar over my shoulders wet from the light rain just like the day I got off the train to enter M. Coulandot's house. I didn't dare go any further... I remembered the joyful fever with which, a year earlier, I had set off for Paris, and here I was, disappointed and discouraged, returning to the very place I had wanted to flee... What would I say to M. Coulandot? What would I say to Father Guérand? And I had once thought that, by leaving, I would avenge myself on Mademoiselle Berthe and Mademoiselle Mélanie! With what ironic smiles they would welcome my return, and with what perfidious compassion they would learn of my failure! No, no, I didn't want my old enemies to triumph over me... I would hide my despair, I would lie if questioned... Besides, why go all the way to the store? What did I have to do in Dijon? Wouldn't it be better to go to Gernin right away? In a few minutes, a train would be leaving...

However, I didn't move: a mysterious force held me there, and there was an inevitable need within me to see again what I had left... The streetcar to Place d'Armes passed in front of me and I got on. It soon stopped at the crossroads formed by Rue de la Liberté, Rue des Godrans and Rue Bossuet, in front of M. Coulandot's house. The same two young men were watching the fabrics on display on the sidewalk. I pushed open the store door. Mademoiselle Mélanie was in her department, just as thin, a little greyer, her nose more pointed; as she was serving a customer, she made a startled movement, then nodded at me. The cashier shook my hands. The apprentices came running too. Nothing had changed... identical coupons occupied the same places with the same little square labels, white on one side, green on the other... The windows still presented

their spring display. The chairs were still arranged parallel to the wall. I was delighted that everything looked the same. It simply seemed to me that I was going to continue my old life. Dressed in the same pleat-less black dress, her long light hair stuck together, Mademoiselle Berthe was hanging up clothes. She rushed towards me, her quizzical nose raised above her weak mouth, and pressed me with questions... I guessed what she was thinking... so much tenderness would no doubt lead me into confidences... but I only said:

"Oh yes, I'm very happy, very happy."

"Hey!" said a large voice, "here's Mademoiselle Claire!"

It was M. Coulandot. He hadn't changed a bit either. As he had on the day I arrived, his long jacket flapped about his legs, a beige shawl warmed his shoulders and a small, softened felt hat covered his hair, and he walked ponderously, rubbing his hands together.

"You see," he laughed, "we haven't replaced you... and if you like... Oh no," he murmured as I shook my head. "Paris won't let you go."

He took me to his office.

"Well, why this return to Dijon?"

I explained to him that I was tired from my incessant work and was on my way to Gernin for a week or two to rest... And then, hurriedly, even though he wasn't questioning me, I told him about my life, with no trace of the truth... The Aubins were charming... only the first weeks had been difficult... I recounted my drawing studies, my visits to the stores... I was overwhelmed with orders... I would soon have to set up shop in Paris, even with some workers.

"You don't know how to lie, Mademoiselle Claire," he said at last.

"But I'm not lying!" I cried.

"You don't want to admit that you're unhappy."

I didn't persist in my stubbornness.

"I suspected it," he said, tugging at his moustache. "I suspected it."

He stomped along, shrugging his shoulders, waving his arms.

"Embroidery, embroidery! You thought you'd live by embroidery. And the Aubins, a lovely household: the man, an idiot, the wife, a shrew. Ah! My poor child! And what are you going to do now?"

I had no idea.

“Would you like to come in? Your place is free.”

A few moments earlier, I’d already accepted the possibility of this solution, because no one else was suggesting it to me, but all M. Coulandot had to do was mention it to me, and I’d reject it with all my might. Mademoiselle Mélanie and Mademoiselle Berthe would know the defeat of my pride and the collapse of my ambition... Defeated, humiliated and repentant, I would take back forever a place I had so enthusiastically abandoned! What a revenge for them! And then, no, no, I didn’t want to live again in that store, behind that counter, behind that big bay window through which I used to watch Lucien go by at midday. Yes, I liked misery better than this tranquility, like a conscious death.

“Come,” said M. Coulandot. “You’re not ready for this idea yet. Take a rest in Gernin and think it over.”

I stayed in the house for two nights, sleeping in my old room, eating at the communal table, just as before, and often he would say to me with a wink:

“Well, Mademoiselle Claire, have you made up your mind yet?”

Madame Coulandot, who wasn’t a talkative person, also tried to convince me, but the poor woman lacked skill.

The old ladies often spoke to each other in hushed tones; often, too, all honeyed, they tried by questioning me to uncover some truth they must have suspected.

Father Guérand was unaware of my return. He showed no surprise, however, and simply reproached me for leaving him without news. He didn’t exclaim; he just nodded mechanically, without the slightest expression of astonishment on his face, as if he were recounting something very natural. Finally, I told him what M. Coulandot wanted.

“Yes,” he said, “Monsieur Coulandot advises you to stay with him. No doubt it’s your salvation... at least it’s the discomfort removed, the calm regained... But I think, my dear child, that you’re too quick to despair of yourself. It’s not impossible to make a living from embroidery, it’s just hard to do it right away... You were in a hurry to triumph, so you got bored too quickly... You mustn’t get discouraged... No doubt the Aubins didn’t spoil you... Personally, I’d have preferred to see you in one of those boarding houses sponsored by society ladies. They offer young girls isolated in Paris a family home... It’s not so expensive. You would have made contacts there... these ladies would’ve introduced you to the stores

where they buy... they might've used your talent themselves, and you could have waited for larger orders... I'm afraid that as soon as you return to *L'Épée de Bois,* you'll be eager to escape... I would urge you—"

"But how can I wait for orders? I've run out of money."

"Ah!" he said.

He remained silent, and from then on, I could only extract meaningless words from him.

I set off for Gernin. April was drawing to a close. The green rye and wheat were shooting from the ground, and over the blond forests the shadow of the clouds was slowly slipping away. Greyer, its cracks larger, the house leaned over the roadside with its thatched roof and its shutters that had once been green. A white lilac bloomed against the wall. Mother had come to pick me up at Tilloy Station, but the cart she drove belonged to the village priest. She'd had to sell hers and the old horse she hitched to it. My mother didn't welcome me with great affection; my father was very cold to me. The need for me to recuperate in the middle of the year seemed strange to them both. On the first day, they asked me a few questions, but as I arranged everything in my own way, too sure that my father would not forgive me for having failed, they were content with my explanations. They no longer quarrelled and hardly ever spoke. I took back the little room at whose window I used to lean as a child on winter nights, to look at the starry sky, the blue moon, the snow-covered forest, and to hear the wind complain and chafe, and nobody worried about me. From time to time, though, at mealtimes, my father would ask me:

"When are you going back to Paris?"

I didn't know what to say, so he shrugged and left me alone. Thus, left to my own devices, I roamed the countryside, torn between the advice of M. Coulandot and that of Father Guérand. How tender the earth, where our first steps trembled, becomes to our heavy hearts! Never had this Nature, so poor, so ungrateful, seemed more beautiful to me: spring, which brought it life, made it charming, soft and delicate, and its own softness made me languid. I was outside all day long, wandering through the woods, following the little paths that get lost in the ferns and brambles. Buds were bursting on the branches; violets, water lilies, and May bells scented the air. I came back through meadows and fields as twilight descended. I'd banished all painful thoughts, as if I were always

going to live there, in the middle of fields and forests, idle, without desire, without dream.

A letter from Paris shook off my torpor: the confectionery on Boulevard Malesherbes that had promised to write to me had ordered eighty bags of sweets for the month of August. The letter gave me a few minutes' joy... but it was short-lived! I calculated the cost of such an order... We'd have to employ a worker. Who could I ask for money? I couldn't ask my father or my mother. The image of Madame de Lure flitted through my mind. If only I could find her... she was so kind... but I immediately saw myself in front of her... I would never dare... No, it was all useless. I had to go back to the store. In a few days I'd write to M. Coulandot.

I didn't have to write to him. He arrived one afternoon in Gernin. A farmer's carriage stopped in front of the gate and M. Coulandot got out. I ran to him.

"Father Guérand," he said, "came to my house. Yes, he visited... We talked about you for a long time, and I agree with him now... You still have to try your luck in Paris. The good Father told me how much he would have liked to see you in one of those boarding houses run by certain society ladies. As it happens, one of my nieces, who last year was preparing for an Agrégation[4] in literature, lived in Faubourg Saint-Antoine in a club reserved for young French and foreign girls. Very modest terms. She sent me all the information... would you like to go?"

"But," I said sadly, "there's not enough..."

"Ah," he said, "I understand, but I have something to give you from Father Guérand..."

And handing me an envelope:

"Here are five hundred francs."

"But I don't want to... I can't accept!" I cried.

"And why not?"

"Father Guérand gives what little he has to the city's poor. I have no right to take what would be theirs..."

"He is trying to help you, child."

"I'm young, I'm able-bodied—"

"Mademoiselle Claire, last night I spotted the large, bulging dresser with copper sconces that was in Father Guérand's study at an antique dealer's on Rue Verrerie. This envelope contains the sum paid to him by the dealer. You see, the good Father doesn't *give* it to you. He lends it to you and he expects you to return it to him one

day.”

M. Coulandot coughed.

“And now have you made up your mind?”

“I’ll be leaving the day after tomorrow.”

XI

THIS is your room, Mademoiselle Fournier," said Mademoiselle Cendre as she led me to the second floor. The old lady opened a narrow door and stepped aside.

It was a bright room, wallpapered in pretty blue paper. It overlooked a large, quiet garden, with grapevine wrapped around the window on tight strings. An iron bed, a pitch-pine wardrobe and sink, a table and shelf, a leather armchair, and a small bench made up the furnishings. White roses bloomed in a porcelain vase. Mademoiselle Cendre must have noticed my gaze lingering on the flowers.

"The girls from the Circle gave you these."

Then she added:

"Would you like to see the house? We brought the trunk. The boy will put it in a nearby closet so it won't be in your way."

Petite, her brown hair greying, Mademoiselle Cendre walked briskly, a little stooped, her head bowed. Her face, already wrinkled, retained a kind of disillusioned gaiety: however lively and playful her eyes, there was a sad smile on her lips that confessed the poorly suppressed regrets of a disappointed soul. She wore silent cloth shoes and one of those ample corsets that widen the waist. A pocket sewn into the side of the dress held a bunch of jingling keys, and the strap of her apron couldn't properly fasten around the waistband of her skirt. As the headmistress only came to the club two or three afternoons a week, Mademoiselle Cendre took her place with the title of general secretary. She had lived there since the foundation, rising at dawn and going to bed last, taking care of everything, receiving and installing new boarders, composing meal menus, ordering and regulating all purchases. Her activity was unimaginable.

First, we crossed a long corridor, with a dozen or so rooms similar to mine, and a rather cramped bathroom at the end. She'd open one door: "You see?" she'd say, then close it and open another. The old stone staircase had a wrought-iron banister. Mademoiselle Cendre, proud of all the beauties in the house, was

quick to praise it. “It’s ancient,” she explained. Suddenly she fell silent: someone was coming upstairs. She leaned over, startled, then galloped down. Soon I heard her irritated voice:

“But no, but no, sir, you must go to the salon. Men are not allowed in the apartments.”

When she joined me, her face was flushed, but she gave me no details, and our walk continued. In the entrance courtyard, on the left, the refectory had been built. Long tables were lined up one behind the other, already set for the evening meal: on a very white tablecloth, in front of the stemless glasses and the napkin clasped in a wooden roll, the cutlery, made of English metal, was arranged at regular intervals.

“Here’s your seat,” said Mademoiselle Cendre, indicating the middle place setting at the first table. “You’ll see how comfortable we are.”

She pushed open another door: it was a vast room, all furnished with small tables laden with books, magazines, inkwells, and paper. A velvet sofa occupied the back, and three or four armchairs seemed lost in the middle of the room. One table, isolated from the others, disappeared beneath games of checkers, backgammon and chess.

“This is the living room,” said Mademoiselle Cendre proudly.

Through the high windows, all you could see were the flowers and foliage of the garden. Young girls sat under the trees, reading. It was like being far, far away from Paris, in the countryside, not in the center of the Saint-Antoine district.

“You’ll see how nice it is here,” she continued.

The titles of the magazines were unfamiliar to me; dry and serious, they almost all dealt with social or political issues. So, this was what the residents of the club were reading! As I worried about my ignorance and the humiliation it would undoubtedly cause me, Mademoiselle Cendre touched my arm:

“Now we need to complete a few formalities.”

She took me to a small office near the living room, then searched for a pair of glasses, secured them, swiped a feather lightly from a small stuffed elephant, and dipped it in a glass inkwell. Then began a veritable interrogation. My name, my age, the place of my birth, the home of my parents, the length of my stay in Dijon and Malakoff, Mademoiselle Cendre spared me no questions, recording each answer in tiny handwriting on a large black ledger. When the

interrogation was over, she asked me to pay her the first month's tuition, fifty francs.

"For food," she added, "you pay à la carte for what you eat."

She raised her glasses to her forehead, and lifted the penholder in the air:

"Do you have a brother?"

"No."

"The only people of the opposite sex who can visit the girls, and only in the living room, are fathers and brothers."

She poked the penholder into a horsehair tassel and slipped her glasses into a case.

"These little formalities," she said, "are important."

Just then, the director asked for her.

"We dine at half past seven," she said. And she left me.

When the dinner bell rang, Mademoiselle Cendre, who was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, accompanied me to the refectory.

"Here's a new friend," she told the girls.

Immediately, those closest to me extended their hands, while the others greeted me with a friendly nod. The youngest was twenty, the oldest twenty-five. None of them were remarkably beautiful. Their thoughtful faces had only the freshness appropriate to their age, and their dresses were the simplest in the world. Many were already working in professions or trades: some were typists, schoolteachers... others were preparing for exams; a few were foreigners. The one on my right, a tall, blonde, blue-eyed girl, immediately struck up a conversation with me: her name was Mademoiselle Vasseur, and she liked to visit the town to collect stamps. As she named her neighbours, a young girl, prettier than the others, looked at me tenderly. Mademoiselle Vasseur introduced us to each other: she was a provincial like me, Mademoiselle Nollens, who was destined to become a teacher. A boarder arrived late, dressed even less elaborately and with freer manners, Mademoiselle Bernard, an orphan with a few annuities who lived at the club in complete independence, devoting her time and money to socialist works. The dinner menu offered a choice of two soups, two meats, two vegetables, and two desserts, all at modest prices. Each woman proportioned her meal to the size of her purse. Each table was served by a maid. At one point, the noise of voices was so loud that Mademoiselle Cendre asked for a little quiet, but no one

listened.

It was the first time I'd been among so many girls my age, and they didn't talk much about what usually fascinates twenty-somethings: love, grooming, and pleasure. Their conversations were peculiar. Almost all of them had an extreme need for analysis and discussion: they analysed themselves, just as they analysed their teachers, their pupils, their bosses, and they discussed scientific and social subjects freely, sometimes heatedly. In love with the people, either because they came from them or because they voluntarily distanced themselves from the wealthy classes to which they belonged, they despised everything that despised the people. Revolt and vanity were to be found in them, along with a desire for devotion that was perhaps still too theoretical, but they must have loved each other easily and helped each other out. They were mobile, serious as men, and suddenly bursting out laughing at the most trivial cause, like little girls.

After dinner, most of the guests gathered in the living room. Mademoiselle Cendre had the gas spouts lit; but, as they were scarce, the half-light they shed cast a shadow over certain parts of the room, which, despite its size, became almost intimate. Some were reading, others playing, a few strolling in the garden. Mademoiselle Nollens sat down beside me.

"Would you like to have a little chat?" she said.

Her voice was a little languid, like her eyes.

"Of course."

"So, you arrived today?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"I arrived in April. I used to be an assistant teacher at a girls' high school... but I didn't have the time to work. I'm a farmer's daughter, my parents live in Morvan... To my misfortune, I was intelligent. So, after receiving my diploma, they kept me at school, then gave me a scholarship to the lycée.[5] I always had the misfortune of being the strongest student... I loved the countryside, the farm, but my father was flattered that his daughter would one day be a teacher... I have no willpower, I always give in... So, I've never lived an hour as I would have liked. Now I need to pass next year at Sèvres... and I'll continue to lead a submissive existence that I detest."

"I'm also a farmer's daughter..."

I told her briefly about the years gone by. She listened with

folded hands, sometimes interrupting me with an astonished and pitiful “oh! oh!” then hurriedly arranging her slightly dishevelled blonde hair and resuming her attentive pose. At first, I felt proud that she was listening to me with such interest; I could hear the phrases of my story myself, and I tried to make them striking. Then, quite naturally, I saw in this silent attention the charming prelude to a new friendship.

“Would you like to be friends?” she asked.

“But of course!”

The girls deserted the living room for the coolness of the garden. We sat alone on the benches of a window embrasure. Mademoiselle Nollens looked at me.

“You’ll see how nice it is here.”

“That’s Mademoiselle Cendre’s line...”

“Oh, that’s our phrase.”

“Is this a Protestant circle or a Catholic circle?”

“Oh dear, I don’t know. Among the ladies on the committee, some are Protestant, others Catholic... there’s even a Jewess, and there are also some who don’t even practice... But these ladies are not thinking of recruiting proselytes or stirring up dormant beliefs... They founded this club five years ago to provide a haven for girls like you and me... Whether we practice a religion or not, no one cares... For example, Mademoiselle Vasseur, a devout Catholic, is very close to Mademoiselle Bernard, who is, in her own words, a liberated woman. They talk very often, and I’d wager that right now...”

Mademoiselle Vasseur and Mademoiselle Bernard were indeed strolling in the garden. They passed our window. Mademoiselle Bernard was arguing and Mademoiselle Vasseur was shaking her head mockingly.

“And you?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t go to church anymore. My faith isn’t strong enough, but I never fail to pray to the Blessed Virgin in the morning and in the evening... a prayer the sisters taught me in the old days.”

She contemplated me.

“You are either a fanatic, or you no longer believe at all... But it’s not the wise voice of reason that guides you, it’s the first movements of your heart.”

“Why is that? I stopped praying to God, though, because the best man I ever knew didn’t believe in him. His example proved to

me that you could be virtuous without religion. Reason alone guided me."

"I can't believe that reason alone guides your actions. Your face is lean, with sharp lines. There is a flame in your eyes..."

Mademoiselle Cendre walked in silently:

"Ladies, ten o'clock is ten o'clock. I'm going to turn off the lights..."

We stood up. Mademoiselle Nollens held out her hand to Mademoiselle Cendre:

"Goodbye, Mademoiselle Cendre, and good night."

"May I hug you?" asked Mademoiselle Nollens outside my room.

We hugged and as we parted, she added:

"I want you to love me as I already feel I love you."

She was silent for a moment, then said:

"My name is Marie."

It was the sweetest night's sleep I'd ever known, but the next day brought its first sadness. The owner of the confectionery, who had ordered the bags of sweets from me, had died suddenly, and as she had no children, the heirs proceeded to liquidate the business. All my lofty plans came crashing down. The Circle saved me from misery. My fears were known and the young girls wanted me to show them my models. Mademoiselle Cendre, with her arm maternally around my waist, squealed in admiration at each object. Within half an hour, so many orders were placed that she had to write a list. As I was looking for a store in the neighbourhood to stock up on silk and fabrics, she rented me M. Rubinet's shop in Rue des Archives. Then, a few days later, she secured for me a weekly worker.

Mademoiselle Vasseur knew M. Léon Dalbrin, the owner of a large novelty store in Rue de Châteaudun. One day, as she was wearing one of those pendant collars I'd embroidered for her in needlepoint, he inquired where she'd bought it. She first amused him by arousing his curiosity, then named me. He asked her to take me to his house. He was a blond boy, a little paunchy, with short hair, a thin moustache, hard blue eyes, rosy cheekbones and thin lips. He received me like he needed to be elsewhere, examined my samples, put some aside, pushed the others away, said simply: "Three dozen of these, a dozen of these, four more of these," nodded farewell and disappeared. I paid no attention to his brusque manner, too happy to get the order. Only later did he ask me about

my past and the future I hoped to create for myself...

Her gaze bothered me... One evening at dinner, Mademoiselle Vasseur said aloud to me:

"Well, Mademoiselle Claire, you've won over Monsieur Dalbrin... He speaks very highly of you. Yes, yes, you've made a deep impression on him."

All the girls were laughing. Mademoiselle Nollens leaned towards me:

"Perhaps he loves you?" she said, lowering her voice.

Love! How oddly that word sounded in this stern yet joyful circle. A woman's soul is always ready for new illusions. However harshly fate may have treated her, her early naïveté leaves her with the sad gift of successive hopes: she knows the sadness of life and yet she never stops hoping for something else. Most of the girls around me didn't think about love: at the least freed from the deceptive domination it ordinarily exerts, they didn't consider it to be the main object of existence. Even those who recognised its power were only willing to submit to a love enshrined in law, and those most rebellious against society would not have consented to a free union with a man, too sure that society would allow him to dishonor and then abandon them, without incurring the slightest blame: man seemed to them an enemy against whose cowardly undertakings they had to defend themselves by every possible means. At first, such principles surprised me to the point of indignation: all too often, I still regretted having accomplished my own misfortune by setting my pride against Lucien's wishes. My remorse at having lost possession of the greatest joys through my own will alone led me to defend all those who are judged to have gone astray, because they give in to the movements of their hearts. People laughed when they heard me: "Mademoiselle Claire," they'd say, "she's a romantic." Mademoiselle Nollens alone approved, nodding sympathetically. Then, without even realising it, I gradually became less romantic. It's true that the worries of the present forced me to think less strongly about the past. The memory of Lucien fell asleep: the very features of his face faded, as if a shadow covered them, thicker every day. Soon it seemed to me that life could become exciting without love being involved, and that it wasn't necessary for a man to occupy our thoughts or share our destiny to enjoy a quiet and noble happiness. Yes, I thought this, under the slow influence of my companions. Work demanded all

their energy and absorbed all their moments: the ambition to learn sustained some of them; others, enamored above all of independence, wished to obtain the means of living from their own labour; others dreamed only of one day being able to spread good around them and propagate ideas dear to them; all of them rejected with contempt the shameful subjection in which society places women, whether they expect daily sustenance from men or tremble with emotion in their arms. I lived as they did, modestly but surely, on what I earned, and I thought as they did... Cheerful, they claimed that their gaiety was born of the calm of their hearts... Their life was simple and regular and they found it beautiful because every day their efforts brought them closer to the goal they were striving to achieve. The youthfulness of some of them attracted attention... Yes, that's what I thought... One got married: she married a teacher without loving him. I don't understand them anymore. I'd rather live alone until I die than marry a man without loving him. Alone, I can at least *hope* for love: to *hope* for love is still to *live* on love.

In August, the Circle was deserted almost entirely. Mademoiselle Nollens was the only one who didn't go on vacation and we often went out together. As her education didn't detract from her simplicity, she was a delightful companion. We visited museums and monuments like provincials disembarking from a pleasure train. She bore little resemblance to the other girls. Her frail body was a poor shelter for a fragile heart. She had a melancholic soul, at once frightened and attracted by life. How could she bear the bitter destiny that was in store for her? I'd always imagined a schoolteacher as a poor, withered girl, ridiculously dressed, with a pince-nez on her nose, neglected and surly. This one possessed all the charm of a delicate youth and, spread over her whole person, a fearful grace... What little courage she would have if love were to surprise her! On certain evenings, when no breath stirred the trees in the garden, at the mysterious hour when people speak in hushed tones, all the love she undoubtedly dreamed of was already swelling her heart and weighing down her steps. Then suddenly she changed; she remained silent... she shunned me... and if I wanted to reveal her secret, she would simply say: "It's nothing, it's nothing." But sometimes she would cry.

One day, before dinner, as I entered her room, she was sobbing, her forehead in her hands. I rushed to her. She looked at me

imploringly, then, stretching out her arms:

"Claire... Claire..." she stammered.

She pressed herself against me and moaned like a child. I kissed her and repeated, "My little Marie, my little Marie," but she couldn't hear me and could only repeat my name. Then I saw a letter on the table:

"Is this letter..."

"Yes," she said, "that's the letter... he's getting married... he's been married for a week..."

Her tears redoubled. I couldn't understand the words that escaped her in such despair.

"But who? Who's getting married?"

"Louis..."

She added:

"Yes, that's right, you didn't know..."

I didn't dare question her, confused by this pain whose reason I couldn't quite make out. No doubt she loved a young man in her country who had promised to marry her and was lying about it.

"Oh, it's so simple," she said. "I met him at university when I was still a high school tutor. One day, we spoke in the library... He was preparing a doctoral thesis... I loved him right away... He loved me too, or so I thought... And then he spoke to me in a way I'd never been spoken to before. And then I became his mistress... Oh, I knew it was wrong... but I had no regrets."

She no longer cried; only an occasional hiccough would break her voice.

"My darling," I said, "my darling, cheer up..."

"Oh, I have no courage, none at all... and now you won't love me anymore."

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I held her in my arms and kissed her poor face. Ah! I cherished her much more and much better since she suffered for having loved too much. Those whose hearts dominate themselves perhaps demand admiration; those whose hearts are overcome by weakness, only those win tenderness. She didn't want to go to the refectory. I helped her undress, tucked her into bed and stayed by her bedside.

"And I knew nothing," she said. "I was just a distraction for him... I hadn't seen him for a month. He told me he was going to the country. And just now I received his letter."

The bell rang for dinner. She asked me to open the window, as it

was stuffy. The first stars were shining in the warm night. She fell asleep holding my hand.

XII

ONE year passed in that regular, calm flight of hours whose modest charm Father Guérand had once extolled to me, and it was autumn once again. The grapevine which curled along my window turned red; the last white roses dropped their withered petals, and the garden, soaked by the rains, filled with sadness. I remember that the first day I entered my room, it seemed delightful: so small, wouldn't it contain great happiness in the future? Happiness! How I had longed for it, pursued it! For a moment I had almost held it, then rejected it. As I entered a home where everything was foreign to me, my thoughts still darted to it: would I never find it again? Alas, my heart, at that very moment when it was surrendering itself to this dream, knew it was unattainable. Because I'd barely known Lucien, he remained the wonderful being you never meet twice. I loved love, and I could probably never love again. I didn't yet know that even old loves are not reborn and that the beauty of the past is often only the work of our imagination.

One October morning, around eleven o'clock, about a week before All Saints' Day, I was returning to the Circle via Rue du Cloître-Notre-Dame. The sky was low, grey and dense; it was raining a fine, icy rain; the houses seemed all black; I hurried on. As I reached the gate to the square of the archdiocese, a voice called out to me: "Mademoiselle Claire, Mademoiselle Claire!" faintly at first, then so loud that I turned around despite myself. A cry of astonishment escaped me: Lucien Lamastre was standing in front of me. How he had changed! He was no longer the elegant, robust man with the tormented face, bitter mouth and imperious gestures that had dominated me from the start. Everything about him expressed an extreme weariness, as if disgusted by all things; already he was stooping, his hair was greying; he was old. What vile pleasures had irreparably destroyed his youth! And I pitied him as if he were a wretch—but love did not mingle with my pity.

He said, without looking at me:

"I spotted you crossing the Parvis Notre-Dame and followed you."

As I remained silent, he continued:

“I’d just like a few minutes...”

He didn’t finish. He’d gone into the square and I’d followed. There was no one there. Dead leaves covered the sand that swallowed our footsteps; the branches of the trees were completely bare. The rain became more violent and, stained with mud and without colour, the begonias, above which rose a stone Virgin, bent and broke under the weight of the water; from the Seine rose steam. A town sergeant, his head hidden by his hood, walked up and down the sidewalk.

I’d sometimes thought I might meet Lucien in Paris, I’d even hoped I would, and I imagined that this meeting, if it happened, would turn me upside down... He’d be close to me, he’d talk to me, he’d love me again: Ah! How afraid I was of being weak! That day had come and all I felt was calm melancholy... and I remembered my tears, my suffering, my despair... I had cried because of him, and suffered, and despaired, because of him, because of him. Now he was near me, I wasn’t crying, I wasn’t suffering, I wasn’t despairing... there was only emptiness in my heart.

“Are you happy?” asked Lucien.

“I’m neither happy nor unhappy,” I said.

“Do you still live in Dijon?”

“No.”

“Are you just passing through Paris?”

“No.”

“Are you set on it?”

“Yes.”

“Forever?”

“Forever, I think.”

“For how long?”

“For the past year.”

“And what do you do here?”

I explained in a few words. He shook his head as I told him about my departure from Dijon and my move to the Circle. He questioned me, I answered: it was the sad, banal conversation that two people who mean nothing to each other can have. If one of M. Coulandot’s customers had come across me in Paris, he would have greeted me and asked me the same question. Why had Lucien followed me? Why had he approached me? I sensed that not only did he no longer love me, but that he didn’t even have a tender

memory of our past. Was it curiosity that had drawn him to me? Was it some other feeling? I don't know and I've never been able to find out. We circled around the stone Virgin as we had once circled around the Well of Moses. A woman crossed the garden, stopped at the gate and stared in amazement at these slow strollers that the rain wasn't chasing away: she must have thought we were lovers because before leaving she smiled softly.

"And you," I said to Lucien, "what are you doing in Paris?"

He smiled evilly.

"I've resumed the life I once led here."

As I was silent, he added, in a scornful tone:

"I was definitely not born for chaste love."

He went on to say:

"If I had married you, as you demanded, you would soon have hated me, because I would soon have stopped loving you... We had deceived ourselves, and that's exactly what life did to separate us."

Was he lying? Did he want to test me? Did he want to hurt me? Why did he feel the need to talk to me? I imagined that he couldn't forgive me for having resisted him in the past, and that he wanted to take revenge and humiliate me, by mocking our old love, by reducing it to a simple, short-lived mistake, by letting me understand too that he had given himself over to pleasure with a new passion, and that love was of less worth than pleasure.

What did it matter what he said? What did I care what he thought? I was by his side and I was so far from him! I saw again a deserted park, where the yellowing leaves were rotting away, but the lime trees were already bearing tiny buds. I was on the banks of a silent river, in front of a solitary manor house, opposite meadows slowly bathed in the first mists of evening, waiting for Lucien. My heart was beating so fast! He arrived: now we walked through the park; sometimes we touched; then we sat down on an old stone bench... the shadows thickened... he took my hands. I seemed to be dreaming... Yes, it was a dream, a beautiful dream, such a short dream, of which only memories remained... The man I had loved no longer existed... It wasn't the man who had been there, so close to me, talking to me: it wasn't even his ghost. I didn't recognise his voice or his eyes... Why should I have been surprised that he didn't love me anymore since he wasn't the one I had adored? And why should I have suffered for it?

Noon sounded. The street filled with workers and the garden

was invaded.

"Farewell," I said.

He offered me his hand; I didn't want to refuse him mine, so he took it and held on to it for a moment.

"Aren't you going to tell me anything?" he asked.

"I have nothing to say to you," I replied.

A tear wet my veil; I'd never thought my lips could ever utter such words; he didn't see that I was crying.

"Farewell," he said abruptly.

And we parted.

I never saw him again, and although he knew where I lived at the time, he never tried to see me again; I never knew what had become of him, and I never tried to dispel this ignorance... There was a mysterious mourning hidden in my heart... I had loved a man who was dead to me... In my hours of sadness, as in my hours of resignation, it was always of him alone that I evoked the memory... As I write these lines, I can only recall with difficulty the image of the passer-by I met near Notre-Dame.

It was at this time that I became more involved with Mademoiselle Bernard. I didn't feel attracted to her at first. Tall, skinny, hard-spoken and always restless, she both astonished and frightened me. Her masculine allure, her disdain for grooming, her continual need to dogmatise and preach, also seemed to me more voluntary than natural: was she composing a character for herself in order to effect some originality? On several occasions, she had tried to have a long discussion with me: she had read a lot—foreign books, books on philosophy, sociology and political economy; the theorists of socialism, and even the theorists of anarchy, held no secrets for her; I was no match for her in the conversations she engaged in with inconceivable ardor. Little by little, however, I discovered that, beneath her pedantic, rough exterior, she concealed the best soul in the world, and that she did good, simply, without saying so, just like a little sister of the poor. She came from a well-to-do middle-class family. Death had taken her mother at an early age; independent to the point of excess, Mademoiselle Bernard couldn't bear to live with her father; not only did he have common ideas and prejudices that she detested but he also wanted to impose them on her. When she came of age, she separated from him to live as she wished according to her own tastes and principles: she had thus been one of the first boarders at the Circle. It was there that

she began to educate herself, as she saw fit, attending the Sorbonne and the Collège de France; then, disillusioned by the teaching she found there, she frequented popular universities and study circles, going wherever the architecture of an ideal society was being built on the ruins of a present-day one. She was a funny, good-natured person: she crammed far more into her mind than it could hold; so many things were sorted into it, more or less, haphazardly; she imagined that, in our time, you could only help mankind if you had read Darwin, Spencer, Marx, Kropotkin, and many others whose names of which I'd never heard. She would have given her shoes to a beggar who had none of his own but she would have become violently irritated if anyone had suggested that she was performing an act of Christian charity. Although she had an income, she almost never had any money because everything she owned went to help the poor. A strange combination of passionate kindness, false intellectuality, candor, and affectation!

Mademoiselle Bernard had founded a clinic on the outskirts of La Roquette where she spent almost every morning. She took me there. We walked up the long, narrow Rue de Charonne. There were countless wine bars and their zinc countertops were filled with small glasses of wine and large glasses of absinthe. Women in headscarves, their lethargic feet in slippers, a bag in their hands containing their freshly purchased provisions, would come there to have a drink. Mademoiselle Bernard would tell me, with the lyricism of a poet, of the beauty of the people, the beauty of their feelings, the beauty of the neighbourhoods they inhabit, the beauty of the clothes they wear. Scruffy children played on the pavement: from time to time a mother would emerge, fists on hips, shouting and yelping; the child would either not respond, or would step forward resentfully, or retort an insult; the mother would scream, slap and pull the kid back by the ear. Mademoiselle Bernard celebrated even the virtues of mischief-makers. In her enthusiastic naïveté, she confounded the common people with thieves and criminals: in her eyes, you were one of the common people as soon as, to use a common yet striking expression, you "scored poorly." She believed in the goodness of murderers and blamed only society for their crimes.

We entered a passage at the very top of the street, where low, rickety, lopsided houses crashed against each other, and I was stunned to find myself suddenly in front of a small pavilion, painted

white, clean, and even pretty. A waiting room was full of children accompanied by their mothers; a small room was used for consultations, and a large one for dressings. In the consulting room, several young girls in white smocks surrounded a doctor. Mademoiselle Bernard also donned a gown; I sat in a corner.

"Well," said the doctor, "we can get started."

The door to the waiting room was opened. Two hunchbacked girls came in. Mademoiselle Bernard made them undress: shyness made them slow, and in a flash she undressed them herself, an extraordinary deviation of the spine appearing.

"Oh, how curious," exclaimed the doctor, "how interesting."

The girls smiled sadly. How many times had their undressing aroused the same curiosity! The doctor questioned them, examined them, dictated orders. A boy arrived: his hands were burnt. Mademoiselle Bernard picked him up, carried him off and bandaged him: she wanted to do everything, to be everywhere, to leave nothing to her companions, and with a fatherly voice the doctor moderated her ardor.

"Come now, mademoiselle, come now... have pity on these ladies, you're forcing them to remain useless... it's not right, it's not right."

Mademoiselle Bernard would then stop; other children would come, and she would leave them in the care of her friends. Ah! How she seemed to suffer from this momentary inaction! And how she looked at them as they were taken to the dressing room! But soon she no longer controlled herself and slipped back to the front row, close to the doctor... As she knew almost all the patients, she would dispel their fears with a caress or a joke, and inform the doctor of their history, the origin and progress of their illness. A mother pushed a teenage boy in front of her: she stammered to explain that he always wanted to sleep: at the height of the Invalides festival, when the organs of the carrousels were humming, when the brass instruments of the parades were sounding, when the menageries were roaring, if you put him on a chair, or even on the sidewalk, he would fall asleep immediately. At fourteen, he was less intelligent than a child of five. His feet kept swelling, from the ankle to the knee... The doctor tugged at his beard, a worried expression on his face; the boy rolled his beret between his fingers; the mother, her hands clasped, watched the doctor attentively; the young nurses gazed at the boy in amazement. Suddenly, one, two, three, four, ten

questions fell on the poor woman: did she have a husband? where was this husband? did he only have this son? did he drink? It was Mademoiselle Bernard who, more formidable than a judge, questioned and extracted the answers one by one. The mother lowered her head in shame, remained silent, and then confessed half-heartedly:

"He died in hospital, in a kind of madness, with drool in his mouth.

And, triumphant, Mademoiselle Bernard turned back to the doctor, waving her arms:

"That's it... *delirium tremens*, *delirium tremens*. I guessed it."

All morning long, cripples, invalids and sick children followed one another in a pitiful parade of misfortunes and horrors. Twice I thought I would be sick, for I had no idea that humanity was so wretched, and the sudden sight of a terrible evil afflicting an innocent life upset me. I didn't have that sublime indifference that makes it possible to help the unfortunate. Mademoiselle Bernard, always lively, brusque and eager, mocked one, embraced another, jostled a third, scolded this one, congratulated that one, always followed in her comings and goings by the grateful, laughing or tenderised eyes of this little world. How could she be so cheerful? Above all, I resented her energy and good humour... You simply had to admire her.

Mademoiselle Bernard must often have been fooled, such was her kindness; she suspected and enjoyed it. One afternoon, as I was getting tired and going out for a walk, I met her on the doorstep. February was ending on a spring-like day. The sky was blue, a blue that gradually softened, melting into a silvery pile on the horizon. A warm, cheerful sun lit up the streets, and the earth, houses and trees were all white.

"I was just coming to look for you," she said. "Come with me. I'm going to Father Ledrec's."

"Father Ledrec? Who is he?"

"Ah, that's right. I didn't tell you. He's a poor old man of eighty or so whom I met quite by chance, a little after Christmas. One morning, in front of the garden at Cluny, I saw this ragged man selling these hideous engravings. The other merchants spoke to him with great deference, and all called him Father. I bought some engravings from him, questioned him, and then asked around. He was a very good man, born of well-to-do parents—"Father

Ledrec”— only he’d never had any luck. What misery! He hadn’t changed his clothes in six months. Can you believe it? On New Year’s Eve, he sells engravings; during the novena of Saint Geneviève, at the Panthéon, he sells these pious almanacs, and the rest of the year he sells little flags and feathered birds that he makes himself and carries around the streets on the end of a stick. On a good day, he earns about fifty cents. So, I gave him some money and brought him some materials. I think he’s a little less miserable now. I haven’t seen him for a while, and I wrote to him to expect me today at three o’clock at the door of his furnished hotel on Rue Laplace.”

“Where is this Rue Laplace?”

“In the Latin Quarter. Come on, make up your mind.”

I followed Mademoiselle Bernard; we crossed the Seine, climbed Boulevard Saint-Michel and passed the Collège de France, then took a small, dark, narrow street, Rue de Lanneau. The houses, with their slender, shutterless windows, leaned back, all grey, crushing the weight of the poor, sunken, darkly-painted stores on the first floor. The sky was almost invisible; no sound could be heard; everything seemed to be asleep. Indifferent and without saying a word, I walked beside Mademoiselle Bernard.

The sky reappeared, paler blue, with a more timid sun. A wide street climbed up, and abruptly bumped into the Panthéon, sad and bare. Clothes with holes in them were drying in the windows, where a child’s dishevelled head would occasionally peek out. A man pushing a cart loaded with herrings preceded them down a bump-riddled alleyway where they could hardly stand without the aid of the nearby building walls.

“Here we are,” said Mademoiselle Bernard. “This is Rue Laplace, and the hotel, number nineteen.”

It was a tall black building, with a muddy door over a rickety step. A brown sign bore the word HÔTEL in large yellow letters. To the left, behind damp glass, a zinc countertop gleamed among piles of wood and sacks of coal. Father Ledrec wasn’t there. Mademoiselle Bernard entered the hotel. A few women came out of their stores and, gathered on the sidewalk, chatted in hushed tones. Others leaned out of their windows. I felt a sudden embarrassment. Mademoiselle Bernard had found no one in the hotel; she went into the wine shop. A large man came forward, his shirtsleeves rolled up, his face all blackened and his hands in his pockets.

“Where’s the hotelier?” she asked.

“It is me,” he said in a thick Auvergnat accent.

“Do you know where Monsieur Ledrec is?”

“Ah, so *you* are the lady who is interested in Father Ledrec!”

“Yes... yes... Where is he?”

“He went for a bite to eat... there... by that dead tree... Oh, look, there he is now.”

An old man crossed the alley wearing a bowler hat. Thrown over his shoulders like a cape and tied to his neck by a string, he wore a torn coat washed by the rains and burnt by the sun. Only half of his left foot could fit into a shoe that was too small, laceless and heelless, and the other, more favored, filled an entire gutted snow-boot. He saw Mademoiselle Bernard. Body bent, legs dragging, clutching his coat, he wanted to hurry and stepped on his pants, which were falling down.

“Hello, Father Ledrec,” she said. “Did you receive my letter?”

He lifted his hat.

“Yes, my dear lady, this morning. And while I was waiting for you, I ate *fifteen cents* worth of grilled meat.” His eyes widened and he smiled as he said this. He shifted his gaze to stare at nothing in particular, then nodded. “That’s what’s good in life... grilled meat.” He looked at me curiously.

“Oh, she’s my friend,” said Mademoiselle Bernard.

“Ah!” he said.

He lifted his hat again.

“She doesn’t look happy.”

I held out my hand. A scraggly white and yellow beard, which continued seamlessly from his hair, hid his temples and cheeks, then flowed down over the front of his shirt. The reddened eyelids had lost their lashes, and deep wrinkles carved out the rare parts of the face where hair was missing from the shrunken skin.

“Well, how are you?” resumed Mademoiselle Bernard.

“Oh, I’m fine, I’m better... You see, I’m better dressed... Oh, I’ve still got my old pants, but underneath there’s another pair, very good... and then I’ve got three shirts on top of each other... That way, I’m nice and toasty.” He smiled again.

“So, you didn’t buy any shoes?

“Oh, new shoes hurt...”

“And the hotel, did you pay what you owed?”

“Oh no, not everything... but the boss is very nice to me...”

“How much do you owe him exactly?”

“I don’t know... so long ago... But I’ll explain...”

Father Ledrec began a long story. Another very unfortunate little merchant had borrowed money from him, money that had been given to him by Mademoiselle Bernard, then left the neighbourhood without giving it back. Father Ledrec piled detail upon detail, the smallest and most insignificant, recounting the life of this little merchant, how he’d met him and why he hadn’t been suspicious. Sometimes he would stop, exclaiming “Ah!” as if to say “You understand” and in his open mouth a large tooth would stick out, the only one he had left. This chatter, which didn’t seem very truthful, amused me. Mademoiselle Bernard nervously interrupted Father Ledrec. The interruption hurt him.

“My dear lady, I’m boring you with my speeches.”

“No, no, but I don’t have much time and I’d like to see your room. Are you comfortable there?”

“Oh, it’s not bad.”

“Why don’t we go upstairs?

“As you wish.”

The whole alley was in an uproar. Mademoiselle Bernard was hardly concerned. At home, on the other hand, the curious looks of the women added to the discomfort that had gripped me from the very first minute. I’d never strayed among the unfortunate, and for the first time I found myself in an airless, lightless, miserable neighbourhood, and then I understood that I didn’t always have to complain. They were hungry, they were cold, they wore poorly patched dresses, bad shoes, they endured all the hardships of life. How gladly they would have exchanged their fate for mine! I wouldn’t have dared speak to them, beg them to confide in me their sorrows, oblige them with a helping hand: extreme modesty would have prevented me: I was ashamed of my skirt, which was clean, of my hat, which was adorned with a feather, of my shoes, which were solid, I was ashamed of my youth and my health: isn’t the one who obliges always a bit of an enemy? And before them I averted my eyes and blushed.

The hotelier stood at the bottom of the stairs with a girl with an obviously broken nose, missing teeth and uncoiled hair. Father Ledrec announced to him, as he passed, in a rather proud voice:

“I’ll show the ladies my room.”

The wooden staircase climbed crookedly, with a greasy banister

and tiled steps. Faint daylight glimmered through dust-grey windows, and puddles of water trailed over the flagstones of the landings. Every now and then, Father Ledrec would say, “It’s high, isn’t it?” Mademoiselle Bernard would reply, “No, no, it’s fine,” then turn to me: “You don’t mind, do you?” she’d ask. “No,” I replied. The ascent continued. Finally, we reached the top floor. Father Ledrec entered a dark corridor and Mademoiselle Bernard followed; he rummaged in his pants, pulled out a key and pushed open a door. I wanted to enter, too. I saw, between two walls, an iron bed covered with dirty linen, then a plate filled with flour glue and little flags, and on the floor rags, breadcrumbs, papers, a whole pile of rotting debris. Nausea seized me, and I stepped back to the landing where there was a little light. Father Ledrec had opened the skylight. I could hear Mademoiselle Bernard chirping:

“How can you live here? You need to remove this linen, sweep it up, air it out. It’s an infection!”

And the old man stammered, astonished, fearful:

“Oh! At my age, you know, we’re good to live anywhere.”

Mademoiselle Bernard continued:

“You promised to pay rent. Why didn’t you?”

And he stammered:

“I don’t know... I’ve paid a few small debts here and there...”

As I made my way back to the bedroom, a stronger nausea seized me again; Mademoiselle Bernard came out, muff against her nose, and dragged me away. Father Ledrec carefully closed the door.

The hotelier was still waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“We need to clean this room,” said Mademoiselle Bernard. “It’s in a terrible state.”

Behind her, Father Ledrec listened, shy, worried, hands clasped, face contrite. The hotelier shrugged.

“He doesn’t want anyone to enter his room. He always takes the key with him. He’s a maniac.”

“Is this true?” Mademoiselle Bernard asked Father Ledrec. He nodded.

“Ah, my dear lady, what does it matter, at my age?”

However, Mademoiselle Bernard would ask for and settle his account, then demand that the room be cleaned immediately, announcing that she would return the next day. He would never hand over the key but swore to open the room for as long as

necessary. The hotelier immediately called in the girl with the broken nose and Father Ledrec obediently climbed back up the stairs with her.

“He’s not very happy that we’re cleaning his room,” I said.

The hotelier laughed. We left the hotel. Outside, the same women gathered on the sidewalk, examining us with the same surprised gestures and whispered reflections. One of them, posted at the corner of the alley, stared at us until the bend in Rue de Lanneau.

“I’m hardly the jaded type,” said Mademoiselle Bernard, “but I do believe that Father Ledrec is a fool.”

I tried to calm her.

“I’m sure of it,” she continued. “He drank away all the money I gave him…”

After a moment, she smiled.

“Oh, well… The poor man hadn’t had a drink in such a long time.”

XIII

AT the beginning of the second winter, I left the Circle. It wasn't easy to carry out this resolution, which I had thought about for some time. Mademoiselle Cendre, on hearing of it, lamented and was indignant: this departure was called desertion... I was in a bad way at the club... what expenses would I have to pay! Every hour she tried to convince me of my folly and ingratitude... Mademoiselle Nollens begged me, weeping, to stay... Mademoiselle Bernard herself, who always maintained that everyone should be allowed to do as they pleased, showed me with copious reasoning that it was in my best interest not to leave. I was insensitive to everything. The obligation to employ a worker who worked at home caused me too much trouble. If I wanted to give her work, or to hasten the work I had entrusted to her, I had to write or run to the distant neighbourhood where she lived. A considerable amount of time was lost in this way. On the other hand, if I rented an apartment where the worker could spend the day, my work would be done faster and more easily. Mademoiselle Cendre finally agreed with me and found a fairly large room with a closet where my bed would fit nicely, on Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, at the top of an old building full of small apartments.

Living on what I earned, I still had almost all the money given to me by M. Coulandot in Gernin. I bought an iron bed, a wash basin, a dresser, two upholstered chairs, a straw armchair and some linen, and in the large room that had been turned into a workshop, I placed a large tailor's table in front of the window. Mademoiselle Nollens sometimes visited me and at all hours. As she had good taste, she gave me invaluable advice.

I imagined that orders would come pouring in and I took far more supplies from Rubinet than I needed. At first, the amount I had to pay frightened me, but Rubinet was quick to set successive deadlines. Deadlines! The word didn't mean much to me; it only concerned the future, and the future tormented me less than the present.

Winter drifted away. I had lunch at noon at the Circle; in the

evening I dined there again, and then I chatted in the salon with Mademoiselle Nollens, unless we went up to her room. The approach of her exam prevented her from thinking so obstinately about her betrayed love. She was no longer angry but simply melancholic. She said, “It’s over, I’ll never love again.” A slightly sad smile wandered across her lips for a moment. Nor did she regret giving in without resistance to a man who was abandoning her. Whereas in the first lapse of pain, she felt ashamed of it, she didn’t regret it now, since at least love had revealed pleasure to her before suffering. And I listened to her, as if she were much older than me, remembering how much I used to despair, during my crises of hopelessness, at having been so violently torn away from Lucien. Mademoiselle Cendre sometimes joined us. Then we’d talk about something else. “If Mademoiselle Cendre,” I said one day to Mademoiselle Nollens, “knew your story...” She leaned over and lowered her voice: “Some of the girls in the Circle say that Mademoiselle Cendre had a great heartbreak. There’s a portrait of a young man in her room, and she always puts fresh flowers in front of it. They say while they were engaged, some accident killed him.”

M. Dalbrin always showed me the same kindness. At first, I had attributed this friendliness to his good nature; now it was beginning to worry me. He talked to me about himself, complaining about his loneliness, and when he knew I was no longer at the club, he complained about me too. Then there were incessant questions about my little apartment, the way I arranged my life, my tastes, my habits. There was more than sympathy in his interest in me. One afternoon in May, when my worker was away, there was a knock at my door. It was him.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I was in the neighbourhood, paying you a visit. I hope you don’t mind my indiscretion.”

“Oh, no. You see, it’s not a very elegant apartment.”

He inspected the room.

“That’s true enough... But that will change... you won’t stay here all your life. You’ll meet a nice boy...”

“A nice boy!” I smiled. “But first I’d have to meet him. And then I’d still have to love him, because if I don’t...”

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “You’re one of those who’d renounce everything rather than love!”

It was the first time he’d ever spoken to me about love. The almost irritated tone of his voice surprised and hurt me. He had

always been proper in our conversations, and suddenly he seemed to be reproaching me for a feeling that I didn't recognise anyone else's right to judge and of which I was proud.

"Ah! Love," he said. "You believe in it! Do people like us have time to indulge in passion? Passion is a luxury for idlers. I don't know what it is, and I've never tried to find out. I've had women, yes, lots of them... but easy women—"

"And what do you expect me to make of this?" I asked abruptly, even more stunned than before, to show him that it was not for me to listen to such confidences any longer.

"Oh, no doubt," he said, with the most natural air, "this doesn't interest you in any particular way... On the contrary... I've known too many promiscuous women to not wish for another kind. For example, I'd like my mistress to be a woman who belonged to no one, an intelligent woman too, a woman I'd respect, a woman who would impose on me. I'd like a pretty, elegant woman. She'd be my equal. What's more, I'd accede to her every whim. Ah, Mademoiselle Fournier, if I were a woman and a man spoke to me like that, I wouldn't hesitate..."

Had I heard wrong? I looked at him; he was laughing. He was barely veiling an offer that seemed so simple. My outraged heart leapt, yet I restrained myself as if I didn't understand:

"You wouldn't hesitate," I said, "to do what?"

"But to accept," he exclaimed.

He walked forward then stopped in front of me:

"Here, Mademoiselle Fournier, you would make me angry... You know very well it's you..."

I turned pale.

"Me! How dare you! And you dare—"

"Well, yes," he replied, his fist clenched. "It's you! I've been wanting to tell you this for a long time... Well, today, I don't know how, it just came to me. And so much the better. There's no need to invent phrases. Here's what I propose. Do you accept?"

Ah! The abominable individual! He was finally uncovering the shameful reason for his long benevolence. No passion transfigured him: he tilted his head, twisting the tip of his moustache; his cheekbones took on a more vivid pink hue; with his forefinger, he made a short, curt gesture. He accentuated his words: he was stating a case. And he had no doubt that he would succeed; he was the only one to provide me with work, and he was counting on my

distress.

"I'd rather be working," I said.

He reasoned, he tried to convince me, he put forward arguments, he developed objections.

"What you're doing is very commendable, I agree. You have a very nice talent, and you want this talent to ensure your existence. But you need a whole organization, seven or eight workers, an agreement with commission agents, regular orders for department stores. It's been two years since you left Dijon... where are you now? You live in a sparse apartment in a poor neighbourhood where customers don't stray, and you've had that dress for as long as I've known you. I bet you never get enough to eat and when you need to pay your worker and your suppliers every week... Ah! You must be having a rough time of it. And Rubinet, how much do you owe him? Oh, I'm well informed... And Rubinet's no picnic, he'll take you for all you're worth if you don't pay up, and there's not much to take here... Come on, Mademoiselle Fournier, be reasonable. It's time. I propose something more solid than love. A lonely woman always needs a man."

I showed him the door and said:

"I beg you to leave."

He shrugged; at the door, he turned around:

"Think it over, Mademoiselle Fournier."

How I wept that day and in the days that followed! I thought I was free, I thought I depended only on myself! And one man, because he paid for my work, took it upon himself to force me to choose between shame and misery! This was the end of my fruitless life's efforts, this was the end of all the desires and dreams of my pride! What was to come? At first, M. Dalbrin pretended to continue the same sympathy, then when he assumed I'd thought enough about it to accept his proposal, he demanded an answer. It wasn't the one he wanted but he confidently said he would wait. Months passed. His orders came less and less, but at the least they allowed me to live. I prepared my own meals with a spirit-of-wine lamp. I had fired my cleaning lady and my worker. Sometimes, at the Circle, a friend would offer tea so I could supplement my meagre lunches. I was constantly worried about tomorrow. In August, M. Dalbrin vacationed in Normandy, leaving me with only an insignificant order. I was all alone. The girls in the Circle had returned to the provinces or abroad. Mademoiselle Nollens, having

passed her exams, was resting with her parents. The heat of Paris was exhausting me: my physical weakness only lessened my moral fortitude.

One morning, I received a letter from M. Dalbrin: he sent me what he owed me, about fifty francs, and warned me not to count on him again. It was easy to foresee that he would do this. Did he now think he could triumph over my poverty? Oh no, I wouldn't give in; I was young, I would fight. I began again in the stores the steps I'd taken a year before; the same fear paralysed me at the threshold; I stammered as if begging for alms and everywhere I was answered: "Oh, mademoiselle, we have our suppliers." Pride forbade me to inform the girls in the Circle. Winter arrived again. Mademoiselle Nollens taught at a provincial lycée. Mademoiselle Bernard was studying some social organization in Germany. One Saturday in December, I was at the end of my tether. I hadn't had dinner. The stove was empty of coal, and as I was shivering from the cold, I had tried unsuccessfully to light all the papers lying around the apartment in the fireplace grate; they blackened and the first flames died immediately. Wrapped up in a shawl and a blanket, squeezed into my only armchair, I gazed at the faint glow of a lamp running low on oil, at this fireless hearth, where ashes were flying. I didn't cry, I've never cried much, I didn't even try to fight this desperate weariness. What was the point of fighting anyway, and how could I fight? My whole life had been a fruitless struggle: my pride had always led me towards chimerical goals. Why hadn't I stayed a store girl with M. Coulandot! I'd discard the misery, the days without bread, the freezing nights, the threatening bailiff, the ceaselessly renewed and ceaselessly useless efforts of an anguished will... I would grow old, like Mademoiselle Mélanie or Mademoiselle Berthe... Perhaps I would have married M. Henry. Ah! I had yearned to live, and to suffer; life had lavished its humblest sufferings on me, the most petty and humiliating, yet I didn't live. Yes, Léon Dalbrin was right: a woman alone is lost.

The doorbell rang. I didn't want to get up. It rang again and I reluctantly opened the door. It was Mademoiselle Alquier—that is, Madame de Lure. She embraced me and entered. As the lamp dimmed, Madame de Lure had enough time to look around the room.

"Wait for me," she said. "I'll be right back."

She went down the stairs, and I, embarrassed by my bathrobe,

shawl and blanket, followed behind her and shouted, leaning over the banister:

"Where are you going? Where are you going?"

But she was already far away. At last, she came upstairs, followed by a coal merchant's boy and a grocer's boy carrying packages.

We're in my room. She lights the fire, pours some oil into the lamp, washes her hands, unpacks the little packages full of dry cakes and makes tea. I am silent. The fire lights up the room, the water boils, the heat spreads and I wonder if I'm dreaming.

"And now, Mademoiselle Claire," said Madame de Lure, "I owe you an explanation. Oh, my God, it's so simple. M. Coulandot wrote to me... I received his letter just now, in the last post. He gives me your address, tells me all about you, your departure from Dijon, your move to Paris, your plans. And then he apologises for writing to me, the poor man. So here I am, and I'm very sorry—and a little angry, too—that you've been in Paris for two years without even telling me."

I looked at her divine beauty, the softness of her eyes, the freshness of her mouth, the tenderness of her smile. I remembered her as a young girl, I saw her again in M. Coulandot's store, I heard the bells of Vernay ringing out her wedding. And I said none of this to her. She began decorating my poor room. As she did, I told her the story of my life, my love for Lucien, the quiet horror of my stifled life, my stay with the Aubins, my visit to the Circle and M. Dalbrin's offer. She held my hands in hers, bowed to me, tears glistening in her eyes. And I no longer complained, since I was enjoying such delicious happiness with her.

"My little Claire, you should have come to my house as soon as you arrived in Paris. I didn't know. I haven't been to Burgundy in two years. I would have helped you. I know a lot of people. And then my house would have been yours. I love you very much, my little Claire."

It was nearly midnight when she left. Her carriage was waiting for her on the street.

"Let's see," she said. "Come and have lunch tomorrow at one-ninety Avenue Victor-Hugo. We'll talk business."

XIV

BY a marvelous gift, certain beings bring happiness wherever they go. Madame de Lure had this divine grace. She was the most charming memory of my childhood and she had consoled my aching vanity in Dijon, I'd dreamed of nothing more lovable in the world and now I compared her to those fairies as good as they were beautiful, whose legends enchanted my younger years without needing to convince them. However, on my way to Avenue Victor-Hugo, I felt a little shy. She'd only ever seen me in M. Coulandot's store in Gernin and Rue des Francs-Bourgeois: the setting suited me. But while she treated me like a friend, didn't my demeanor, my answers, even my gestures make the inferiority of my birth and condition more obvious to her? How little I still knew her! She was sitting in a small rocker at the back of the salon. Her black dress exposed her neck and wrists. I don't think I could have imagined a salon of more delicate elegance and welcoming intimacy: everything was harmonious. She came to meet me. I sat down beside her and her first words filled my heart with an indescribably tender joy. We were almost the same age but her gaze caressed me with a maternal affection that was nonetheless full of youthfulness. Her husband joined us. A very wealthy man, he owned large estates in the east of France.

"Ah!" he said, with a firm handshake. "My wife has often spoken of you. I hope we'll be seeing plenty of you from now on."

Lunch was served. I gazed without envy at the image of perfect happiness, also the rarest. Yet I thought of Lucien: if he'd wanted, we could have lived our lives like this, leaning heavily on each other. There are foreign happinesses that may make you weep with regret, but you love them as if they were your own. Didn't I, in turn, have a great happiness, since the best, most beautiful and most sensitive of women protected me? Ah! Since she loved me, and not as an unfortunate woman who was forced to do so, but as a friend lost and suddenly found, the future was brighter. Madame de Lure had taken my hand in hers and was leading me.

Indeed, everything changed immediately. Madame de Lure,

simple as she was, loved the world, but although her outfits were cited as inimitable models, praise, flattery and compliments irritated her. Other women, without understanding that she embellished everything she wore, tried to copy her. Thus, through her natural taste, she directed fashion in the society she frequented. “Madame de Lure wears this,” a couturier would say to an undecided client as a last argument. This charming domination immediately seemed to her the best way to impose my embroideries. Not a day passed without her activity. The very next day, she took me to the store in Faubourg Saint-Honoré where I’d been so disdainfully received. I’d put together a box of samples. Madame de Lure examined what was in the box; some models were still too provincial, but she didn’t remove them without consulting me, so as not to offend. As soon as we entered, a young woman rushed up to her:

“Ah, madame, how long it’s been since we’ve seen you! What can I do for you?”

She was moving chairs forward.

“I’d like to speak to your manager,” said Madame de Lure.

The manager was the same tall woman, with her pince-nez at the end of her nose. She greeted Madame de Lure.

“Let me introduce you to Mademoiselle Fournier,” said Madame de Lure at once.

The manager inclined her head.

“She makes delectable embroidery, like no one else does,” said Madame de Lure.

“Mademoiselle has already come,” said the manager. “We know —”

“But no, you don’t know... if you did, you would certainly have given her commissions... You didn’t look at her models... She came on her own and you got rid of her with a word.”

“I assure you, madame...”

She didn’t let her continue; she opened the box... the models, in her hands, acquired a new grace. I remained silent.

“See how pretty this garland would look at the bottom of a dress... And this collar, the thoughtfulness...”

The manager would bend down, pick up the models, bring them close to her eyes, then pull them away.

“And this crêpe de Chine scarf! But look at the flowers—they’re silk chiffon appliqués. See how truthfully they reproduce shapes

and colours."

She had thrown the scarf over her shoulders and was pulling it back tight around her waist, all draped with folds that her fingers brought together.

"Ah, madame," cried the manager, "what a saleswoman you would make!"

Madame de Lure couldn't help laughing.

"Mademoiselle hadn't shown us all this..." said the manager. "Certainly, madame, you're right, it's very pretty... and we could use this talent. Mademoiselle would display her models here in the window... and if we liked them, we could order some from her—"

"But," interrupted Madame de Lure, "I'm wearing these collars and Mademoiselle Fournier is going to embroider me a garland for an evening gown."

"Oh, then, madame, I'll say it. When we name an elegant woman, it's always you..."

Then turning to me, the manager added:

"I'm counting on you, mademoiselle."

I wanted to get to work straight away.

"But no, no," said Madame de Lure, "it's not over yet... I have an excellent idea, I think, for your little collars... A commission house needs to order several hundred of them. Only we need to simplify them, so we can sell them cheaply. Let's go to Rue du Caire."

She was already giving the address to the coachman. It was one of those rare January mornings when winter feels like spring. The air was as cheerful as my heart.

We were greeted by a fat little man with not a hair left on his head, a thick white moustache over his mouth, silver spectacles over his eyes, and a taut gold chain stretching across his plump belly. A true character from an English novel, and light-hearted to boot, while having the shortest legs in the world, but still, despite his vivacity, full of importance. No sooner had Madame de Lure uttered four words, than he was already bowing to the ground, rubbing his hands together.

"Perfect, perfect!" he said.

Madame de Lure added a word; he bowed again:

"Perfect, perfect," he repeated.

Finally, he remained quiet for a few moments, and Madame de Lure was able to finish explaining the reason for her visit.

"I thought these little collars might sell easily... Only, as you see

them, they're too richly detailed... and too expensive... They'd have to be bought by working-class women... so they'd have to cost very little."

The commissioner raised his glasses, examined the collars, fiddled with his moustache, and scribbled some figures.

"It's perfect, it's perfect."

Madame de Lure wanted a less vague, less brief answer.

"But," he said, astonished, as if he'd just spoken at length, "it's understood, understood... Tell mademoiselle to bring me a simpler model as soon as possible, and I'll order her several hundred collars."

Madame de Lure thanked him. He was indignant.

Wasn't he obliged to M. de Lure, who had once, because he was his compatriot, got him out of a very bad situation? Was Madame de Lure offering him a bad deal? And wasn't he the one who should be delighted? No, no, he didn't want any thanks, and he stretched out his arm brusquely to reject those Madame de Lure wanted him to accept. At the door, I promised to hurry.

"It's perfect, it's perfect," he began again.

And, after a long, low bow, he walked away.

It was about time because I was about to burst out laughing at him.

XV

MADAME de Lure saved me in a matter of weeks. Everywhere she introduced me, she succeeded in getting me commissions, and distant from me she still serves me, adorning herself with my works. My apartment on Rue des Francs-Bourgeois was too cramped and I had to leave it.

We looked for a small apartment; Madame de Lure wanted it to be in roughly the same neighbourhood as hers, and we found it a stone's throw from the Trocadéro,[6] on a little garden-lined street whose lack of name aroused surprise and which seemed to have been built for the sole purpose of sheltering love rendezvous. I like this tranquility. From my windows, I can see the barbaric towers of the palace emerging from the trees, and the Seine gently rocked by boats. Twice a week, on fixed days, a barrel organ wails on the sidewalk, and every Friday, at around five o'clock, a little old man, broken, stooped, bareheaded, limping, pulls from a worn-out violin slow, tremulous notes. The residents themselves, most of them elderly, wear old-fashioned clothes, and the concierge's children play on the pavement as safely as in an enclosed square.

The apartment has three rooms and an anteroom, so I have a dining room, a studio and a bedroom. Everything has been arranged according to Madame de Lure's advice: we bought the furniture, wallpaper, curtains and carpets together. So, with a few flowers and a ray of sunlight coming in through the window, it's cheerful, simple and charming, and I wouldn't exchange it for the most sumptuous of palaces. Madame de Lure often comes to guide my inexperienced worldly taste: she sits at the studio table, draws an embroidery she has imagined, then harmoniously combines the colours. She sometimes stays all afternoon working with us, needle in hand, if we're late for some order, and right away the workers adore her.

"If your friends saw you," I said, "what would they think of you?"

She laughs:

"I don't care about that..."

And, in a very serious voice, she adds:

"I'm having a lot of fun here..."

One day she brought an apron, scissors, a thimble and a box of silks, so that she had everything she needed to help us and would need to borrow nothing more. When she leaves, I make a little bundle of it, and put it in a cupboard in the anteroom, where each worker puts hers every evening. Happiness at last dwells under my roof, and if not wealth, at least an affluence that seems to me a prodigious fortune: for the first time, I've been able to send money to my father and mother. How sweet my life is! And yet how quiet! How regular! I embroider in the morning, often all day long. After lunch, if I need to, I go to the stores, or, if there's an exhibition of old lace or embroidery, for example, I visit it: I might discover a fascinating or simply pretty model. On Sunday evenings, I dine at Madame de Lure's; during the week, she takes me to the theater once or twice. The other week, I unexpectedly met M. Coulandot at her house: he was passing through Paris, and Madame de Lure had invited him without telling me, to surprise me. I was delighted to see him again: he's turned a little white, and his long Gallic whiskers are greying. He was happy too... What a good man... We talked about *L'Épée de Bois* and were suddenly so moved that we cried a little... Mademoiselle Mélanie had left the store and retired to Talant to live with her sister... M. Henry is getting married; he would like to become M. Coulandot's partner, and M. Coulandot has not yet accepted. Where is the time when I preferred death to a quiet existence? Sometimes I look back over the years: I'm like a traveller who has reached the top of the hill, and turns to look back... In the distance, I catch sight of a romantic girl, whose heart is swollen with desires, illusions and dreams... She's hurrying, hurrying towards a distant goal that's always getting further away; she's stretching out her arms, she's calling; I hardly recognise her and I'm astonished to wonder: is this really me?...

...

CLAIRE FOURNIER'S MANUSCRIPT ends here.

There are, alas, people who are constantly beaten down by life. For them, hope shines but for a moment; they rarely reach the desired land where their distress would die and if they sometimes reach it, they only pass through. One morning in June, one of Claire's workers informed Madame de Lure that the young girl was

ill and wished to see her. The worker couldn't tell her what kind of illness she was suffering from; she simply said that mademoiselle had changed a lot. And indeed, when Madame de Lure entered the room, she was overwhelmed. Nose sniffling, hair undone and tangled, arms inert on the blanket, Claire slumbered, her whole body stretched out with infinite weariness, and so thin that it barely lifted the sheet. Her face was almost yellow. The sound of the door woke her:

"How good you are!" Claire said.

Madame de Lure kissed her—the fever was burning Claire's forehead—then sat down at the bedside, forcing herself to conceal an impression too cruel.

"I'm really unlucky," said Claire, trying to smile. "Everything was going so well. And now I'm sick."

"But it's nothing," said Madame de Lure.

"It hit me the day before yesterday... I had such a headache! I went to bed with a nosebleed and a fever... I thought it was just an illness and stayed in bed all day. But towards evening, I sent for the doctor."

"But it's nothing, I tell you. A few more days and you'll be fine. You've suffered too much these last few years, you've tired yourself out too much, you've had too many worries; you're paying for it all. What did the doctor say?"

"He's an old doctor from the neighbourhood... I like him very much. He's written a prescription and demands that there be someone near me night and day. This room is too small and he wants me to sleep in the larger room, where the workers are. But he doesn't know what's wrong with me yet."

Her hand took Madame de Lure's hand.

"Ah!" she said in an anguished voice. "I'm afraid to die!"

At first, Madame de Lure only responded with a light laugh. However, shocked that such fear should be expressed so quickly, when the young girl was unaware of the very nature of her ailment, she discerned in it a divination of death.

"But you're crazy, my little Claire. Tomorrow you'll be as brave as ever."

She took off her hat and gloves.

"What are you doing?" asked Claire.

"Do you think I'd leave you alone?" Madame de Lure did not return to Avenue Victor-Hugo. What a guard she would have been

with her gentleness, her simplicity, her intelligence! She fluffed up the crushed pillows and mattress, washed Claire's face, combed and braided her hair. She also gave her an elixir, encouraged her with a few words, refreshed her forehead, taking care to be cheerful, joking, saying that Claire was playing the patient, as she herself was playing the sister of charity. M. de Lure came by in the afternoon, and around six o'clock, the doctor arrived. The illness had not yet taken hold. From then on, the doctor came every day. During a visit he made at the end of the second week, Madame de Lure no longer doubted his concern. No matter how cheerfully he questioned the patient and announced a speedy recovery, Madame de Lure could not be fooled.

"Well," she questioned, "is it serious?"

"It's typhoid fever."

Madame de Lure could not repress a shiver of fright.

"She'll heal, won't she?"

He nodded:

"Young as she is, she's worn down by life. Will her body have the strength to resist? We can save those who are robust. I'll do everything I can. And maybe there won't be any complications."

"Do you have so little hope? Tell me the whole truth."

"Yes, very little."

He left. As night fell and Claire dozed off, Madame de Lure turned on the lamp. She couldn't take her eyes off the girl. How right the doctor had been! Claire's emaciated face bore all the marks of irreparable wear and tear. The certainty of a now-sheltered existence might have erased them for a few months; now they were reappearing, and more deeply. While Claire was just learning to be happy, was she going to die knowing nothing of life but continual pain? Madame de Lure thought of herself too, outraged that fate had granted her everything: wealth, love, beauty, while it struck down a child so eager to fight misfortune. A mysterious inequality that filled her with sadness. Suddenly Claire spoke. Her cheekbones were red, her eyes fixed, and she uttered words that had no meaning. Madame de Lure often heard one name: Lucien. Claire implored Lucien, begged him, then defended herself as if in hand-to-hand combat. Madame de Lure had never seen death, and however brave she was, a supreme terror overcame her. In spite of herself, she retreated to the door, frightened by the screams, the convulsions and the solitude. The crisis lessened in

violence, the face became less grimacing, the frenzied flailing ceased. Claire fell into a heavy despondency.

The next day, a nurse was stationed at the patient's bedside. A week's vigil had shattered Madame de Lure. So, she wrote to Claire's parents, Father Guérand and M. Coulandot. Father Guérand and M. Coulandot replied that they would leave as soon as they could. Claire's father was bedridden with rheumatism, his wife unable to leave. The doctor no longer expected even a miracle to cure Claire. The hallucinations were more numerous, the breathing more laboured; every night the delirium began again, to continue during the day. Claire often tried to get out of bed herself. Everything they tried only served to increase her suffering. Another guard had to be called in to immobilise Claire in the icy water of the bathtub. Every hour her strength declined.

"There's no hope," said the doctor. "She won't last another day or two."

Madame de Lure telegraphed Dijon.

Father Guérand and M. Coulandot arrived together in the morning.

"It's horrible, it's horrible!" sobbed M. Coulandot.

Madame de Lure beckoned him to speak more softly and contain his tears. She slowly led them into the room.

"It's Father Guérand and Monsieur Coulandot," she said, leaning towards Claire. "They're passing through Paris and have come to see you."

Slowly, Claire turned her eyes towards them.

"Would you mind leaving me alone with Mademoiselle Claire?" asked Father Guérand.

After a few minutes, Madame de Lure and Monsieur Coulandot returned.

"I'm going to give her the last rites," said Father Guérand.

Towards evening, as the sun was setting, a final convulsion shook Claire, then she breathed weakly, a great calm bathed her face, and her whole body, stiffened by so many crises, relaxed for a long time; one would have thought she was asleep, if her eyes, always enlarged, had not retained the same fixity.

"It's the end," said Father Guérand.

M. Coulandot buried his head in his hands. All was silent. There was no sound from the street, just an uncertain shadow. Leaning over the bed, the Father listened to her breathing slow to a mere

murmur. He did not weep, not that all the deaths he had comforted had accustomed him to a spectacle that was always horrible, but he was so desolate that his tears choked him without being able to flow. He thought of the useless, desperate effort of his entire existence as well. Claire had wanted to live... he could hear her confessing her bitter desire in that little office in Place des Ducs where she visited him on Sundays: “I want to live, I want to live!” She wanted to be loved, she wanted to be happy, she wanted to be free. Of love, she had known only perfidious hypocrisy and vile brutality; of life, she had known only pitiful misery: hunger, cold, insulting offers. She had finally left the best of masters to depend on more numerous and indifferent ones, all those who could command and pay for her work. And death was taking her, without her having lived, without her even having had time to live. He leaned in closer. Madame de Lure and Monsieur Coulandot stared at him, not daring to question him:

“It’s all over,” he said.

Gently, he lowered the girl’s eyelids, closed her half-open mouth and knelt down, signing. M. Coulandot also knelt and made the sign of the cross.

FIN

About the Author

Paul-Théodore Acker was born on September 14th, 1874 and died at the age of 40 on June 27th, 1915. He was a prolific writer of popular fiction and contributed as a journalist to various French-language newspapers and literary magazines. In addition to being awarded the Prix Montyon (1904) and Prix Kastner-Boursault (1914), he was also the inaugural recipient of the Grand Prix du Roman (1915) for his entire body of work. As he died while in service to France during World War I, he was bestowed the honor of *Mort pour la France.* He was buried in his birthplace of Saverne.

Note on the Translation

To be abundantly clear, this was not a typical translation project. What follows is perhaps a bit tedious, but I believe it necessary to allow full transparency of the process.

Outside of a few common words and phrases, I do not speak, or even read, French. For this reason, I initially refrained from naming myself “Translator.” A better appellation would be “Translation Overseer” as I let a translation software (DeepL) handle the brunt of the work while I hovered over its shoulder, making sure everything looked as it should. I chose DeepL as it was recommended by a German relative that uses it professionally and I’ve had remarkable success with its German translations. Based on reviews of its French translations, it would seem the quality is similarly high.

Beyond the actual translation, there was work to be done before and after that critical part. As there were no text file versions (EPUB, DOCX, etc.) of *Le Désir de Vivre* at the time I started, I needed to convert a scan of the text to actual characters that could be manipulated. After obtaining a somewhat clean scan of the text in PDF format, I used Adobe Acrobat's OCR (Optical Character Recognition) tool, then converted the file to a Word document.

As impressive as OCR is, there were still a plethora of mistakes stemming from issues with the scanned original like smudges, ligatures, and what seemed to be ink blots. After spending far more time than I thought would have been required, I managed to correct the majority of issues manually by referencing the source. The remaining issues would be found later in the process.

We now have a corrected French text that can be uploaded to DeepL, and helpfully we can upload the entire document all at once. After testing various sections with British English and American English translations, I opted for British English as this is a very French story and it felt right to keep the English in Europe. After getting back a surprisingly readable, yet obviously flawed, translation, the real work could now begin in earnest.

I decided on a mix of literal and semantic translations as I wanted to keep Acker’s voice clear while not allowing awkward

phrasing to snag the reader's flow. I also wanted to keep the ambience of France by leaving in things like "Monsieur" and "M." instead of "Mr." and "Rue de la Liberté" instead of "Liberty Street." Certain French words that don't have a direct translation like "lycée" were also kept as-is. Once the style of translation was settled, it was a smooth, yet lengthy, process of going through one chapter at a time, re-translating certain sentences for clarity, adjusting word choice, and generally keeping as much as possible literal while smoothing out the rough edges. The vast number of semi-colons were also left in, as this was a more customary practice in the early 20th century. I would like to think this could read as a contemporary translation done shortly after *Le Désir de Vivre* was published.

I would be remiss if I didn't offer a brief explanation of my own *désir de traduire*. The catalyst for this project was a YouTube video [7] I watched in January 2024 detailing interesting facts about the video game Dark Souls II (2014), and a copy of *Le Désir de Vivre* can be found on a shelf in a building in the hub area of Majula. The book can also be found in the Duke's Archives in the first Dark Souls game. I was, and still am, a huge fan of the Dark Souls series of games in addition to well-written stories in general, and would've loved to find an English translation as the title alone is an excellent distillation of what those games mean to so many. I'm not sure if the book was placed in the game world for the title alone or if a member of the development team had actually read it, but I knew *I* wanted to read it.

Unfortunately, no English translation existed and, as mentioned above, I (still) cannot read French. If I wanted to see whether this novella were a cypher to a better understanding of the ethos of Dark Souls and perhaps even the mind of its creative visionary, Hidetaka Miyazaki, I would need to set aside the time to bring the English translation to fruition myself. This took much longer than originally anticipated, but having completed this translation, I am incredibly satisfied with the result. I don't know if any direct parallels could convincingly be traced from *Le Désir de Vivre* to the Dark Souls series, but there are certainly elements here and there that would make for an interesting essay, at the least. If the reader finds enjoyment from this sort of "literary excavation" as I did, I'll count that as worth the effort I've put into this project.

Lastly, concerning the copyright of this novella, French

copyright law states that all works of an author are protected for 70 years after their death. An additional 30 years is added if the author, like Acker, *mort pour la France*. Since Acker died in 1915, that puts the original French novella well outside the range of copyright protection.

I'm not looking to make any sort of profit by providing this new translation to the public. I simply want more readers to enjoy this story. My goal was to let Acker's writing stand for itself and I hope I've done that. I certainly enjoyed this story and I hope the reader does as well.

L.B.H. Causey, February 2025

GOOD-BYE, THEN...

Be safe, friend...

Don’t you dare go hollow.

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[1] FASHION SHOPS THAT sold the newest clothing and accessories

[2] Members of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, a Catholic religious order of Pontifical Right founded in 1610

[3] Specialized top-level educational institution focused on art and design

[4] Highly competitive and prestigious examination for teachers in France to be assigned to secondary and preparatory schools

[5] French secondary school funded by the government

[6] Palace built in 1878 in an area of the same name that sits across the Seine opposite the Eiffel Tower. It was demolished in 1937 to make way for the Palais de Challiot.

[7] “Dark Souls 2 Challenge ► 10 Things You Missed in Majula (NG+)” by VaatiVidya